

*ASAKTA KARMAN IN THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ*

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## Abstract

This thesis contains an analysis of *asakta karman* (action without attachment) as described by Kṛṣṇa to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The analysis is done in two ways, pursued concurrently. The contribution of the thesis to the discipline of the study of religions lies in their mutual interaction.

One way is the exploration of *asakta karman* as a possible human method of acting. This way is constrained by my prior impressions of human possibility. It also involves considerable interpretation of Kṛṣṇa's words. It is possible to derive a philosophy of *asakta karman* from the text, but not a methodology. The psychology of the *asakta* actor is obscure. His or her actions may or may not have observable mental correlates. Where they do, anticipated consequences figure in a purely formal manner, as by-products rather than as causes of action. Actions then are mere events, following causal laws that may not be known. Accordingly, the question 'who is acting?' collapses in all cases upon one entity, identified as *prakṛti* or Kṛṣṇa. The severe determinism implied here is neither philosophically nor scientifically obsolete, and can be seen positively by interpreting the term '*bhakti*'. This determinism, however, conflicts with the text's presentation of *asakta karman* as a universally available method.

The other way is the understanding of *asakta karman* as a textual theme that has facilitated redactorial addition. By imagining the text as a historically expanding socio-political object, we can resolve different editorial concerns. Arjuna does not mention *mokṣa*: this idea can be traced to the disruptions caused by the growth and mixture of populations. In such a disrupted world, creators of successful, stabilising texts advanced their own interests, so the text is rhetorical and ideological rather than philosophical. This is particularly true of its treatment of theism and *bhakti*. The methodological coherence of *asakta karman* is a narrative fiction.

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This thesis is dedicated to my *gurus*, many of whom will be slain therein, and to my *svajana*, who are exempted from such treatment because their expertise lies elsewhere.

## Orthography

All non-English words used in this thesis are presented in italic type, with diacritic marks where necessary. Generally the undeclined stem of Sanskrit nouns is given, though when discussing particular textual instances declined forms are occasionally given. In cases where a Sanskrit word has been slightly modified, according to English grammar, to fit the context of the sentence in which it figures (for example, *karmic*), the whole word is italicised. A glossary of Sanskrit terms used is given in the Appendix.

Names of persons or families are given in normal type, with diacritic marks.

Names of texts are given in italic type, with diacritic marks.

Genres of texts (for example, the Purāṇas) are given in normal type, with diacritic marks and with the initial letter capitalised.

Geographical names (such as names of places and rivers) are given in normal type, with diacritic marks, except when there is a well known anglicised version, in which case no diacritics are used.

These distinctions are important: it is necessary to distinguish between *brahman* (the imperishable absolute upon which manifest phenomena depend), *brāhmaṇa* (a person of the first *varṇa*), *Brāhmaṇa* (the name of a text, as for example in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*), the *Brāhmaṇas* (the name of a text genre, of which the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is an example), and *Brahmā* (the name of a deity).

Because there is a wide range of orthographical conventions in use amongst scholars, to present quotations in their original form would require a large number of footnotes to clarify quotations by explaining where the quoted author's conventions differ from my own. Rather than follow this line, I have taken the liberty of making minor adjustments to the presentation of quotations and, in the bibliography, to the presentation of book and article titles. These adjustments do not affect the sense of the material quoted: on the contrary, if I had not made these adjustments, then the sense of the material quoted would in many cases have been affected by its new context.

1.1. *Asakta karman* as textually situated and as a general strategy

The *Bhagavadgītā* is a small episode in the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* tells the story of a conflict between two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, over succession to kingship. The conflict results in an enormous war. Almost all the warriors of the known world fight as allies on one side or the other, and only a handful are left alive. The *Bhagavadgītā* covers a brief period immediately prior to the war. Arjuna Pāṇḍava is dismayed at the sight of his relatives and *gurus* in the opposing army, and refuses to fight. There follows a long conversation with Kṛṣṇa, his charioteer, in which Kṛṣṇa does most of the talking, and the text ends with Arjuna resolved upon battle. The content of *Bhagavadgītā* is that conversation. It is reported, some distance from the battlefield but without commentary, to the blind regent Dhṛtarāṣṭra by the bard Saṃjaya, who has ‘extra-sensory stimulation and hearing from a distance’.<sup>1</sup>

Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa, ‘how could we be happy having killed our own people?’ (1:37cd). Kṛṣṇa supplies Arjuna with a method for killing his relatives and teachers, and Arjuna fights on after all. This method is intended to allow certain necessary actions to be performed without the actor incurring unpleasant consequences. I have called Kṛṣṇa’s method *asakta karman*, even though this formulation never occurs in the text, because it is *karman*, action, performed by one who is *asakta*, non-attached, with respect to it. The word *asakta* occurs in the text to describe a person acting in Kṛṣṇa’s suggested manner at 3:7d, 19a, 19c and 25c. At 5:21a, as part of the compound *asaktātman*, it describes the *ātman* (in this context, self rather than soul) of the ‘knower of *brahman*’. At 9:9d it describes Kṛṣṇa himself as the paradigmatic non-attached actor. At 13:14c it describes ‘that which is to be known’, *i.e.* *dehin*, the ‘bearer of body’: this occurrence is not illustrative of *asakta karman* because, as the text makes clear, *dehin* is inactive. At 18:49a, as part of the compound *asaktabuddhi*, it describes a certain mental faculty of a person acting according to Kṛṣṇa’s method.

<sup>1</sup> *Mahābhārata* 6.16:8ab. All translations of Sanskrit texts in the thesis are my own except where indicated otherwise. *Mahābhārata* references are to the critical edition: its chapter numbers do not correspond to those of any complete translation. Saṃjaya’s words are given in the text, according to its own self-mythology, as told by Ugraśravas, who heard them from Vaiśampāyana, who heard them from Vyāsa, who was the origin of the tale and the overseer of Vaiśampāyana’s recitation of it.

These few textual instances are supplemented by the occurrence of the feminine noun *asakti* (detachment or non-attachment) at 13:9a as one of the components of true knowledge, and of the noun *asanga* (same meaning) as part of the compound *asangaśāstra*, the sword of non-attachment which will destroy the possibility of repeated rebirth. Elsewhere the text uses *sakta*, the opposite of *asakta*, to describe a hypothetical person acting in the way discouraged by Kṛṣṇa: at 3:25a this person is attached to action, at 5:12d to the fruit of action. At 18:22b *sakta* describes unproductive (*tamasic*) knowledge as attached to necessary action. The noun *saṅga* (attachment) occurs at various points in the text (2:47d, 2:48b, 2:62b, 5:10b, 5:11d, 18:6b, 18:9c, and as the first member of compounds at 11:55b, 12:18d and 18:23a) to denote that which the unfortunate are imbued with and act with, or that which the fortunate have managed to eradicate from their minds and activities.

The narrative context of the *Bhagavadgītā*, in which Arjuna will not fight and, then, after hearing it, will fight, prejudices our understanding of the content of the dialogue. It tempts us to see Kṛṣṇa's speech first and foremost as an answer to Arjuna's question. To approach the *Bhagavadgītā* from this perspective is to imagine oneself in Arjuna's shoes, being convinced by Kṛṣṇa's argumentation. Since Arjuna interjects during the speech to seek clarification on certain points, it seems that he is engaging with what is said and that his subsequent fighting is due to this engagement. Kṛṣṇa ends his speech with the words 'Have you heard this with one-pointed mind? Has your delusion of ignorance disappeared?', to which Arjuna replies, 'The confusion is gone: through your kindness I have found memory. I am standing, doubt gone, and will act out your instruction' (18:72-73). In the textual situation, the points Kṛṣṇa makes are convincing. However, Kṛṣṇa claims that his points are generally convincing, and that his methodology is universally applicable beyond the immediate situation of Arjuna's military exploits. If properly applied, it can enable anybody to act effectively, appropriately and untraumatised in any situation that arises. It is presented as a general strategy for being able to act without being bound by one's actions. From Kṛṣṇa's viewpoint, it is applicable to Arjuna's situation because it is a general strategy: 'Actions do not bind the self-possessed one, whose *karman* is relinquished through *yoga*, whose doubts are cut away by knowledge. Therefore, having cut away with the sword of knowledge this self-doubt resting in your heart, born of ignorance, practise *yoga* and stand up!' (4:41-42).

The text's presentation of a general strategy can involve the reader quite



intimately. If Arjuna's initial problem had been that he had forgotten a particular martial move, then Kṛṣṇa's speech could remind him of this move and set him fighting, and the subject matter of the *Bhagavadgītā* could remain within the context of the narrative. But Arjuna's problem, as interpreted by Kṛṣṇa, is a specific instance of a general problem. This problem may be extrapolated even beyond the historical context of ancient Indian discourses about action, and seem to be a problem of the human condition.<sup>2</sup> As such, Kṛṣṇa's answer to it is naturally of interest to any comprehending reader. Even the student of Indology, whose study may ostensibly take place in an academic context, would be hard put, when confronted with such subject matter, not to relate it in some way to his or her own situation and his or her own problems of acting and deciding.

The logical persuasiveness of Kṛṣṇa's speech is, I shall argue, just a narrative fiction. The reader is invited to sustain the fiction by Arjuna's being persuaded to fight. Sustaining the fiction, the reader tries to have what Kṛṣṇa says make sense philosophically. This leads to a very traditional view of the text, as a repository of practical wisdom. Previous studies of the text have been largely conditioned, in the same way, to view the *Bhagavadgītā* as a disciple would his or her *guru*. Hindu intellectuals have always offered their commentaries in a reverential and apologetic manner: if interpreted correctly, they say, the text is a great gift. This approach has largely been inherited by the discourse of religious studies, probably partly for diplomatic reasons. This approach to the *Bhagavadgītā* is also strongly encouraged by the narrative framework of the text itself. Arjuna says, 'I am your disciple; instruct me' (2:7d), and then Kṛṣṇa discourses at some length. The convention of understanding Kṛṣṇa's speech on the basis of the coherence and applicability of its philosophy of action, is an extremely old one. That a universalist claim is made from within the text itself testifies that the convention was in place before the text was fixed into the form in which we now have it. Notwithstanding, it remains no more than a convention.

This thesis will, in attempting to tease out a philosophy of action from Kṛṣṇa's speech, remain faithful to the convention of philosophically sympathetic commentary, but it will also acknowledge that the convention may be unconnected to much of the text's contents. The narrative format serves to disguise the convention, but it may well be that this narrative format was engineered by the person or people who first

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<sup>2</sup> Gandhi said of the *Bhagavadgītā* that 'a knowledge of its teachings leads to the realisation of all human aspirations'. J. W. Hauer said that it gives 'profound insights that are valid for all times and for all religious life'. These quotes are from Radhakrishnan 1948:10-11. See also Mundschenk 1997, Mahadevan 1952:103: other examples could be found at will.

established the convention, perhaps by presenting pre-existing textual fragments in a certain way. We will begin by asking: What exactly it is that Kṛṣṇa recommends to Arjuna and, by extrapolation, to the audience of the text, which now includes ourselves? What does it mean to be attached with respect to action, and what does it mean to be unattached? I shall show, in detail, that these questions remain unanswered, and, in brief, why this is so.

### 1.2. De-centring the reader, re-centring the text

The writing of this thesis has coincided with a gradual disillusionment of my intentions for it. I began my research under the influence of the narrative fiction of the coherence and wide applicability of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy of action, and set out to describe and expound that philosophy in its historical context. However, although there exist many other more or less contemporaneous texts in similar language, it is not possible to access the historical context subtly enough to make precise sense of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy. Whatever impressions one might get from one passage are likely to be dimmed by another: there is an unbridgeable gulf between the supposed signifier, the text, and the supposedly signified, the 'philosophy'.

In what sense, then, does Kṛṣṇa make sense in his speech? In the sense of Arjuna. The universal appeal of Kṛṣṇa's methodology, the soundness of his philosophy, is a textual impossibility. My pursuit of it is an indulgence allowed by my personal circumstances. But the existence of the narrative fiction is itself very interesting. It seems to be contained in the text in a way that Kṛṣṇa's philosophy is not. But what is the text, then, if it is not the vehicle of philosophy which it seems to present itself as, and is ordinarily taken for? This is the question one reaches by trying to find out about 'the text's' philosophy. It can probably be reached by trying to find out about 'the text's' anything. The text, then, is not whatever it seems to present itself as. It is an artefact, created 1.5-2.5 thousand years ago for some purpose. It was a tool. If it is still in use as such, there may or may not be other similarities between the purposes it is put to today and its original purpose, if it makes sense to talk of such a thing. In this way, the question of the philosophy in a text leads very quickly through the history of the use of the text, to the circumstances of its creation *as* text. These original circumstances, however, are in the first instance mythical and hypothetical, since we can imagine the use of the text to have involved modifications, perhaps on such a continuous scale that

'the original' has disappeared. Either way, the study is socio-historical. By systematically interrogating the text's putative philosophical soundness we are led to imagine the social, political and religious purposes of the text's editors. These presumably include the narrative fiction of that philosophical soundness. It is thus my belief that any study of ancient texts is, first and foremost, socio-political history. Only secondarily can it be religious or philosophical studies, even though its attraction might be in having initially seemed to be these things primarily.

In the chapters which follow, I have tried to remain as faithful as possible to my original intention to display a coherent and applicable philosophy, even though the philosophical lacunae in the text eventually frustrate this intention. I hope that nonetheless the thesis will serve several purposes. Firstly, to communicate the results of my search for Kṛṣṇa's philosophy. These, in the context of what is commonly held to be the case about the text, are extraordinary: the text, when rigorously interrogated, offers no methodology for acting without attachment, and its philosophy of *asakta karman* is of dubious personal use while threatening social ideologies ancient and modern. Secondly, to explicate this eventuality by constructing a socio-political authorial rationale which could explain, historically, why the text appears to expound a philosophy which it does not, and what it might be trying to do instead. Expecting to find out about human action, I have instead found out about texts: what the people who make them do with them, what the people who receive them do with them, and why these two are so often so different.

### 1.3. Heroism and non-attachment as personal attributes

Arjuna's initial problem is that, having looked upon the ranks of those that he is supposed to kill, he suspects that even were his side to come out victorious in the war, the consequences for him and his brothers would be too dire to countenance. To win, in these circumstances, would be as pointless as to lose, and so there is no point to the contest. 'I will not fight', says Arjuna at 2:9c. And at 1:37: 'It is not meet for us to kill the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, our own relations. For how could we be happy having killed our own people?' Kṛṣṇa approaches Arjuna's situation from various angles. He appeals to Arjuna's machismo, portraying wimping out of the battle as the worst of all options. He makes losing look more attractive by emphasising that death in battle would lead straight to heaven. Most importantly of all, he makes winning attractive by suggesting

that the spiritual damage normally caused by committing certain atrocious deeds can be averted if those deeds are performed in a non-attached manner. This sounds like a direct answer to Arjuna's question. Kṛṣṇa then launches into an exposition of his methodology of non-attachment. He does not pause to emphasise that the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra are scoundrels and deserve a good thrashing for their own good and everyone else's: earlier books of the *Mahābhārata* have adequately demonstrated that the war is in a good cause, and this is not questioned by Arjuna, who is only worried about his own and his brothers' involvement in the war because of kinship and *guru* taboos. There is evidence elsewhere of this problem arising, that is, the strategic need to be able to perform despicable actions without hesitation, and thus the need for a methodology of action which avoids the expected evil consequences of action. We read of such a methodology in the *Kauśītakī Upaniṣad* 3:1:

'Pratardana Daivodāsi, by means of war and valour, arrived at Indra's beloved abode. Indra said to him: Pratardana, choose a boon. Pratardana said: You choose for me what you consider most suitable for a person. Indra said to him: A superior does not choose for an inferior –you choose. Pratardana said: Well, that's no boon to me. But now Indra did not leave truth, for Indra is truth. Indra said to him: Perceive just me. This I consider most suitable for a person, that he or she perceive me. I killed the three-headed son of Tvastr; I offered the Arunmukha ascetics to the dogs; violating many agreements, I crushed the Prāhlādīyas in the sky, the Paulomas in the intermediate region, and the Kālakañjas on earth. In doing so, not a single hair of mine was damaged. Whoever knows me does not have their world damaged by any action whatever, be it stealing, murder, matricide or patricide. Having committed a sin, the dark colour does not leave their face.'<sup>3</sup>

In this passage Indra says the key is to perceive just Indra: similarly, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa says that the key is to perceive just Kṛṣṇa, since Kṛṣṇa is the Almighty God comprising and transcending everything. Kṛṣṇa expounds his methodology from many different angles, always urging Arjuna to adopt this methodology and use it to fight forthwith. The passage just quoted bears considerable comparison to the *Bhagavadgītā*. In both cases a methodology for alarming activity is propounded, and the actions of a great figure are mentioned as its paradigm (Kṛṣṇa is the paradigmatic *asakta karmin* in the *Bhagavadgītā*: see above, chapter 6). In both cases there is a mismatch between the recommended method and the paradigmatic method, since neither text names what it was by perceiving which the paradigmatic activity was so accomplished. Did Indra escape injury and horror through perceiving himself? Does Kṛṣṇa? In any case the idea is clear: apparently daunting, traumatic and prohibited activities can be achieved with great efficiency ('not a single hair of

<sup>3</sup> Olivelle 1996:215-216 seems to read *loko* (world) as *lomo* (hair) in the penultimate sentence, which spoils the sense of the passage somewhat. 'Sin' is an unfortunately Judaeo-Christian translation of *pāpa*, but nonetheless captures its normally existential sense, which the passage presents as optional. The last sentence is not a reference to blushing but to the absence of the paling which might accompany expectation of comeuppance.

mine was damaged'), and without the ordinarily expected payback, by means of a certain attitude of singlemindedness in the person acting.<sup>4</sup>

The context of such an attitude in both texts is initially military, and is then extrapolated into other areas. We might call this attitude a martial art. It is still traceable in existing martial arts,<sup>5</sup> in sports of various kinds, and in other strategic-competitive endeavours engaged in by heroes, for example heroes of cinema. We might say that to be truly heroic it is necessary to access this attitude. It is no surprise, then, that in many sporting activities a high premium is set by achieving and maintaining a certain mental approach to one's physical activity. The outstanding performers in any sport are those who have access to the appropriate, highly specialised temperament for it. Sometimes this temperament is short-lived and a response to specific circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Other performers have had more deliberate and consistent access to this temperament, but all would acknowledge it to be a fragile thing, easy to lose. The idea that actualisation of this attitude could be ensured by something about the individual, irrespective of external circumstances, is an interesting idea, suggested in the *Bhagavadgītā* by Kṛṣṇa's frequent descriptions of his *bhakta*, the *karmayogin*, the *sthitaprajña*, the person who has become *brahman*. The connection of the *asakta karmin* with a certain special knowledge perhaps gives the impression that such knowledge, once attained, will remain, and the attitude can then become part of the person.<sup>7</sup> But we could then ask why this happened to that person, and an answer in terms of specific circumstances seems unavoidable. This would, in the terminology of the *Mahābhārata*, collapse *puruṣakāra* (the doing of the person) into *daiva* (that of the gods). The *Bhagavadgītā* addresses the general question of why a person might become a *karmayogin* in a number of ways: because of propitious rebirth amongst *karmayogins*, or because of hearing and understanding Kṛṣṇa's discourse (Kṛṣṇa, as God, presumably knows that Saṁjaya is listening too: the text's redactors also had listeners in mind). As for Arjuna, despite his excellent performance during the battle, he does not appear to have become a permanent

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<sup>4</sup> At *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.12.9:7-8 the pollution due to wicked action is to be avoided through knowledge of *ātman*.

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting thesis could be compiled by comparing and contrasting the attitudes encouraged by existing martial arts. In the present work I have confined myself, after this brief introduction, to the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>6</sup> Devon Malcolm took 9 wickets in 13.3 overs to destroy South Africa at the Kennington Oval in 1994. This performance, by some distance the best bowling of his career, has been put down to his fury at being hit on the visor of his helmet while batting immediately beforehand (Engel 1995:394). Richard Hannay in 'The 39 Steps' (Hitchcock 1935) must either solve the mystery swiftly and heroically or be wrongly punished for murder.

<sup>7</sup> Imagine a batsman who is never out, except on purpose or through umpiring error.

*karmayogin*: later in his life he claims to have forgotten what Kṛṣṇa told him, and asks for a repeat, which Kṛṣṇa himself admits he cannot provide properly (*Mahābhārata* 14.16). If Arjuna fought bravely in the battle despite his initial misgivings, and without having really understood what Kṛṣṇa told him, this is presumably accounted for by Kṛṣṇa's experiential revelation of his *paramam rūpam aiśvaram* (highest Lordly form, 11:9d). Such an experience is not accessible in the same way as the preserved text of Kṛṣṇa's words.

Using the sporting analogy to understand the attitude that is advertised by Kṛṣṇa and Indra leaves much to be desired: many of the dimensions of horror, trauma and social prohibition that may attend military activity seem to be absent from sport. Despite this, I believe the analogy is a useful one. If we push the analogy, we might say that the continued existence of sporting activity, and its popularity, not least amongst non-competing observers, may be taken as contemporary evidence for the obscurity of the attitude Kṛṣṇa and Indra recommend. If a transferable method of having such an attitude at will had been found, then sport would not be as interesting as it is. This suggests, in advance, that the *Bhagavadgītā* will find it hard to set forth a comprehensible and comprehensive description of what the attitude is and how it is to be attained.

The subtlety and mystery of the attitude Kṛṣṇa recommends has often been mentioned by commentators, and is even mentioned by Kṛṣṇa himself, as a reason for the difficulty of his presentation. Whilst we can see, by means of the sporting analogy, that the attitude is obscure, this goes against the text's apparent universal appeal, which recommends a line of action and a mental discipline designed to achieve it. Because of this, I am reluctant to appeal to the mystery of the subject matter as an explanation of the vagueness, incompleteness and contradictoriness of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy. It is perhaps possible to have such a thing as a mystical philosophy, but to think that this is what the *Bhagavadgītā* gives us is to indulge the text and the reader. The claim that the text is mystical is suspected of being post-facto, to cover philosophical inadequacy arising for practical text-historical reasons. It may be seen as the surrendering of philosophical integrity. It is, in a way, the surrendering of the text, which is replaced by other tools in the quest for understanding. Because the text provides such a stable reference point, being always and quite simply a certain combination of Sanskrit syllables, to surrender it is also to surrender a way of grounding understanding beyond the understanding person, a way of sharing and validating. Far better to have the courage of one's initial textual convictions, see the narrative fiction for what it is, banish

the fantasy that the text exists to cater for one's spiritual needs, and wonder more realistically why this exact text exists, that is, under what circumstances it could have come to be what it is.

#### 1.4. Notes on gender

Up until quite recently it has been fashionable to write as if all human beings were male. This fashion is still sustained by certain publishers.<sup>8</sup> It is unfortunate that such a fashion was allowed for so long to go uncorrected, for it embodies a clear fallacy: not all human beings are male. This fallacy can only have gone unnoticed for so long in a climate where male authors and readers were happy to proceed without imagining female authors and readers. It is alarming that this lack of imagination, and the fallacy it hides, was not addressed until female authors and readers suggested so. This lack of imagination constitutes an extreme embarrassment for the academic enterprise, and will continue to do so increasingly. Since academic work often includes quotations from academic work done previously, we are to be continually reminded of the prejudices of the past, even when such prejudices seem more and more shameful. Writings embodying this gender fallacy may be sound in other respects, but when quoting from them I have often been tempted to introduce an editorial '[sic]' to highlight the fallacy where appropriate. I have refrained from doing so, and I must therefore ask the reader to remember throughout this thesis that not all human beings are male.

It is possible, despite this, that there were in ancient India some groups of thinkers for whom, in certain respects, all human beings were male. There may have been soteriological discourses which saw salvation as only applying to men: it is a commonplace in ancient India that *mokṣa* can only be attained from a human state, and that animals can only attain it through rebirth as a human being, and such reasoning may have further narrowed the specifications to human males only.<sup>9</sup> For this reason we cannot, in our translations of Sanskrit texts, unproblematically render masculine pronouns as 'he or she' to remove gender bias. Ancient authors may have had philosophical reasons for referring to hypothetical persons as masculine. However, in the *Bhagavadgītā* it is explicitly stated (9:32) that the attitude Kṛṣṇa recommends to

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<sup>8</sup> See Wilson 1998, which uses exclusively masculine pronouns when referring to tokens of the type 'scientist', but tries (unsuccessfully) to ameliorate this oversight on page 116 by calling a hypothetical future neurobiologist 'Mary'.

<sup>9</sup> Bhāskara's commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* exemplifies this position: see Sharma 1986:37.

Arjuna is available to all people of whatever sex or social status. The *Mahābhārata* shares this universal appeal: see Fitzgerald (1991). For this reason I have found it possible to translate into gender neutral language without risk of misrepresentation. We may speculate that the text only made its universality explicit because it was presented in a context where it would otherwise have been taken as only referring to twice-born (high status) males.

Translating into gender neutral language introduces a problem: it is hard to find efficient ways of referring to persons of unspecified gender. English has singular pronouns for a person or entity of masculine gender (he), of feminine gender (she), and of neuter gender (it), but no pronoun is available to denote a person who is presumably gendered but whose gender is not specified because it is, for present purposes, irrelevant. The standard methodology here is to double the gendered pronouns, putting 'he or she', 'himself or herself', 'his or her', and so on. This is clumsy, and becomes overbearingly so when translating from a language, such as Sanskrit, which uses pronouns in abundance. For this reason I have sometimes made use of the plural pronouns 'they' and 'their', which cover masculine, feminine and neuter entities, in situations where a singular pronoun would have been expected. For example: 'a person must find their umbrella quickly when the rain starts'. The sentence is grammatically incorrect, but does not jar because the singular subject need not be singular: 'a person' can be replaced by 'people' without any change in sense. Likewise, often in Sanskrit a hypothetical person is described in the singular, but this person is not a unique possessor of the description, he or she is an arbitrary token of a type that is being described. Where the singular implies a token of a plural type, the use of plural pronouns for gender neutrality will not, I hope, inconvenience the reader unduly.

### 1.5. Plan of thesis

There follows a summary of the argument of the thesis. Paragraphs from this section are reproduced at the beginnings of chapters three to six.

This chapter has served to orient the reader and introduce the nature of the study reported in this thesis. We have seen that, from a narrative point of view, *asakta karman* is expounded by Kṛṣṇa as method by which Arjuna might defeat his relatives and *gurus* in battle without suffering dire consequences. From the perspective of religious Hindus, *asakta karman* is a method by which any faithful person might live an assertive,



practical life while maintaining peace of mind and the likelihood of spiritual progress. Of these two perspectives, which are both contained in the text, the Hindu one is more germane to the study of religions, but this thesis is a study not of Hinduism but of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and thus will view the religious perspective as a secondary possibility, emergent from the narrative. This religious perspective will be explored not in relation to religious Hinduism since the *Bhagavadgītā*, but in relation to the wider cultural context within which the text was first presented in its current form.

Chapter two will briefly review the main currents of the literature on the *Bhagavadgītā*, and of the literature on other subjects relevant to the approach I shall be taking. In the first two sections I distance myself from two quasi-religious approaches, giving examples of how they bias analysis of the *Bhagavadgītā* in ways that, for my purposes, are damaging. Firstly I focus on the Hindu tradition and explain that, since the text was already foundational of a certain type of Indian identity, Indian writers have in the main commented reverently on the text, without the freedom which comes of detachment, and have thus been unwilling to ask the kinds of questions I am asking, and even, on occasion, unwilling to countenance anyone else doing so either. Secondly I look at the reception of the text by European students of religion, and bring out ways in which a colonialist Christian culture has pressed it into the categorisations of its own discourse rather than viewing it on its own terms.

Next, I turn to the more rigorous tradition of European Indology, which has viewed the text as a collection of historical words and ideas rather than as the vehicle for a current worldview. This tradition is very important for my study, and I survey the various Indological approaches to the text of the *Mahābhārata*, justifying the view that it has had a long period of gestation, being presented in its current form by compiling editors with particular socio-political agendas in mind. Then I turn to the *Bhagavadgītā* and discuss various schemes that have been drawn up of its historical growth. I highlight the political nature of historical schematisation of a sacred text, but I defend such schematisation against its critics, showing, on philosophical grounds, that a theory of explained interpolations may be required in order fully to explain the text being as it is.

A brief section deals with mythological interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*'s narrative, both from within the text itself and from scholars engaged in comparative cultural studies, explaining that these perspectives are not particularly valuable for my close philosophical approach.

The final section of chapter two is apparently incongruous as it discusses in some detail philosophical insights drawn from recent scientific discourse. This section is required because many of the issues it throws up are vital for an understanding of the philosophical determinism which, although clearly present in the text, has been scarcely treated by most commentators. In investigating Kṛṣṇa's philosophy I have found that current ideas in biology are comparable to the *Bhagavadgītā's* deconstruction of the individual. I have also found that the prevailing understanding of quantum mechanics serves to obscure the ontological realism that underlies the *Bhagavadgītā's* worldview as well as our own, and I show that this understanding rests on a philosophical fallacy which, when removed, allows Kṛṣṇa's determinism to be sympathetically reassessed. The prevalence of this fallacy in our own times shows how radical and how ideologically dangerous determinism is, and helps to explain how editors with socio-religious agendas might have made interpolations in order to obscure its textual visibility.

Chapter three describes in detail the problem, or problems, which ancient hearers of the text would think Arjuna to be faced with if he kills his relatives and *gurus*. This problem, or these problems, are to be averted, according to Kṛṣṇa, by the performance of *asakta karman*, and must therefore be thoroughly understood in order to situate our main topic. The first section of the chapter explores the Indian soteriology of repeated rebirths ending in final emancipation (*mokṣa*) from *samsāra*, in which context the result of Arjuna's deed would be to severely delay 'his' arrival at this end. An attempt is made to expound this soteriology as fully as possible, but, in doing so, many impenetrable philosophical problems are encountered, and the discussion is forced to try to account for them. I show that one of the main building blocks of the soteriology is the philosophy of *dehin*, the 'one-in-the-body', an inactive witness which is presupposed whenever there is consciousness of anything, and that the soteriology can be explained as a philosophically illegitimate biographisation of *dehin*. If the career of the *dehin* is modelled on the career of a person, then *mokṣa* is hypothesised as a post-mortem analogue of peace of mind.

The second section of chapter three continues the attempt to account for the soteriology with its philosophical problems, bringing in demographic and social factors to aid explanation. The social utility of the idea of rebirth according to merit is highlighted, and situated in the context of population expansion following from technological innovation. I suggest that the idea of *mokṣa* served as an intellectual

justification for social delinquency which was widespread as a result of the disruption of many existing communities. The theory of *asakta karman* countered this intellectual justification, as it maintained that even ethically dubious activity is no barrier to spiritual progress if undertaken with correct understanding and a detached attitude.

The next section scrutinises Arjuna's speeches at the outset of the text, to find out what *he* thinks the problem with killing his relatives and *gurus* is. Arjuna is primarily concerned with two things: his own future mental state, and the integrity of his kin-group, epitomised by ritual offerings to the ancestors. He does not mention the soteriology described above. I argue that his concerns predate it, and explore those concerns as representative of a kin-group ideology which may have existed with minor variations in many kin-groups which had previously been relatively isolated. The material in this section is central to the whole thesis: the historical context for the idea of *asakta karman* is to be found in the passage from the ideology of the kin-group to the ideology of a diverse and extended society. The final section of the chapter takes up Arjuna's concern with his own mental state, his fear of the responsibility for the downfall of his kin-group. I argue that Kṛṣṇa's theory of *asakta karman* was textually in place, to allay fears of post-war trauma, before the soteriology of *mokṣa* was developed, and that the text was then reworked such that demerit retarding spiritual progress would appear as the paradigmatic trauma obviated by *asakta karman*. I take up once more the idea that *mokṣa* is modelled on peace of mind, and show that the text successfully combines these two goals but leaves a gulf between the goal of *mokṣa* / peace of mind and those eventualities (prosperity, worldly success) which might be thought to presage peace of mind, a point reiterated in section two of chapter four.

Now that we have explained what *asakta karman* is for, the remaining chapters of the thesis investigate what it is. *Sakta* and *asakta* describe the internal attitude of the person rather than the actions performed: what do they mean? How is one unattached to the fruits of action?

Chapter four focuses on the text's attempt to elucidate *asakta karman* using the ideas of *yajña* and *lokasaṃgraha* (the holding-together of the world/s). The *asakta* actor, says Kṛṣṇa, acts for the sake of these things. The text's exposition of *yajña* in this context appeals to a *brāhmaṇical* presentation of the idea of the cosmos being sustained, through human action, in a proper manner which will reciprocally ensure the material welfare of all creatures within it. The problem dealt with in the first section of the chapter is that the sustenance and coherence of the world constitute the fruit of activities

and, being pursued, should render such activities *sakta*. I argue that the only alternative to thinking of one's actions in terms of fruits is not to think of them at all. Although this idea is barely intelligible, at least as regards one-off actions such as participation in the *Mahābhārata* war, and although the text does not admit that this is what it must perforce mean by *asakta karman*, I suggest that *asakta* actions are psychologically void and only describable in terms of *yajña*, *dharma* or *lokasaṃgraha* from an external viewpoint. I show that *yajña* fails to explicate the mental attitude that Kṛṣṇa is keen for Arjuna to adopt, because the text cannot find a bridge between the traditional, cosmic and external meaning of the term, and the new, internal meaning which Kṛṣṇa implies. An internalised type of *yajña* is alluded to by the text, but seems to refer to alternative ritual practices: these practices are hard to compare with the *brāhmaṇical yajña* because they do not share the same ostensible purpose.

Having ascertained that the idea of *yajña* contained in the text is incoherent in itself and also unhelpful for Kṛṣṇa's exposition of *asakta karman*, the second section of chapter four attempts briefly to site this eventuality in terms of the socio-political context of the text's production. I show that the text's differing views of *yajña* serve its assertion of the primacy of the Vedic ritual and ideological complex and its assimilation of other cultural forms to that Vedic complex which, since about the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s production, began to go hand in hand with *brāhmaṇical* hegemony over a new kind of society. I argue that the text's social agenda is masked behind an apparently philosophical reconciliation of fundamentally different goals, prosperity on the one hand and *mokṣa* / peace of mind on the other.

The final section of chapter four introduces several interesting textual applications of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s unruly concept of *yajña*. The *Mahābhārata* presents the war as a *yajña*, and I show that the Pāṇḍavas' justification of their engagement in it can be seen as applying the *lokasaṃgraha* model, as given in the *Bhagavadgītā*, to a sphere of action involving complex political and personal realities. This expansion of the notion of *yajña* beyond its old ritual context precipitates a new kind of responsibility into previously straightforward areas of human activity, and, by way of an example, I show that the Dharmaśāstras betray the increasing incidence of Arjuna-type existentiobehavioural crises in ancient India. Arjuna's plight illustrates the failure to find a systematic rationale for decision-making: this failure is bypassed by the text's *bhakti* determinism, a thoroughly philosophical solution which appears to run counter to the purposes of some of the *Mahābhārata*'s editors, and hence appears in the final text only

in disguised form.

Chapter five is dedicated to an exploration of determinism in the text. The first section is introductory: it takes up once more the ontological realism established in the final section of chapter two, and shows that the text depends upon this realism and justifies it in terms of praxis. I argue that the information given by Kṛṣṇa, that *prakṛti* is the sole actor, is the cornerstone of *asakta karman*. The second section analyses *svabhāva* and *ahaṃkāra*, concepts essential to the text's deconstruction of agency, and looks at the idea of determinism as presented by various characters of the *Mahābhārata*. I show that this idea, known as the *kālavāda*, is integral to the Epic as a whole, as well as to certain modern understandings of behaviour.

The third, fourth and fifth sections of chapter five survey the ways in which the idea of determinism conflicts with linguistic and psychological conventions. Section three argues that the deterministic viewpoint undoes the ideas of choice, possibility and probability. Within such a viewpoint, the status of intentions and perceived motivations as causes of behaviour is purely hypothetical, since there is no reason to suppose that a creature will know enough fully to explain its own behaviour. Further, such mental occurring hypothetical causes are themselves causally determined events. Section four transposes these ideas back into the context of the text's creation, and shows that determinism is anathema to the purposes of the text's creators, who were concerned with trying to encourage certain types of behaviour amongst large quantities of non-philosophers. I prove that the view that determinism promotes inactivity is fallacious, but that it has nonetheless led to the derogation of determinism within the text, an eventuality which can explain why the *Bhagavadgītā* has been so widely misunderstood. I also show that the idea of one's *karmic* history accounting for one's present circumstances is a socially motivated attempt to channel dissipated responsibility back onto the initial agent, this time in the form of the biographised *dehin* theorised in section one of chapter three. Section five broadens the discussion of determinism by arguing that the linguistic and symbolic tools at the disposal of the philosopher, which are conditioned by the facts of human spatial separation and interaction, make it almost impossible to expound determinism intelligibly. This explains why *asakta karman*, which depends upon determinism, is such a difficult idea, and why the text is forced, as discussed in section one of chapter four, to exemplify it in terms (*yajña*, *lokasaṃgraha*, *dharma*) which transparently do not apply.

Section six of chapter five compares the determinism of the *Bhagavadgītā* with

that of the *Ājīvikas*, an ancient Indian ascetic sect. The *Ājīvikas* believed that the attainment of *mokṣa* was determined, and I show that the *Bhagavadgītā*'s determinism also entails this. The contrast between the asceticism of the *Ājīvikas* and the activism of the *Bhagavadgītā*, however, underlines the problem, discussed in chapter four, of the *asakta karmin*'s mental presentation of his or her actions, which is required if a methodology of *asakta karman* is to be provided. I show that the text's attempts to provide such a methodology are derived from ascetic traditions, but that in this they are inapt: *asakta karman* is methodologically inaccessible, and the apparent existence of a methodology within the text serves only to encourage certain types of *karman*.

The final section of chapter five investigates ways in which ideas used in the text might be interpreted in light of the determinism which has been uncovered. It begins with an exposition of *buddhi*, the psychological faculty of awareness which is the location of the non-attachment being sought. I show that the knowledge that all actions are determined and carried out by *prakṛti* will fundamentally alter the way a person presents actions to him or herself, in such a way that 'singleness of *buddhi*', which Kṛṣṇa deems necessary for *asakta karman*, might result. Next, I reinterpret the term *bhakti* such that it also indicates an attitude, of sharing one's actions with their real agent, which is derived from determinism as well as conducive to non-attachment.

Chapter six explores Kṛṣṇa's claim that he is the most excellent *asakta karmin*, which is intended to provide an example for Arjuna to follow, a guide to acting *asakta*, as well as a guarantee both of the possibility and of the utility of so acting. In the first section of the chapter the claim is assessed as a comment on the way Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva behaves. This involves ignoring Kṛṣṇa's specifically divine actions. I show that Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's actions are perfectly compatible with his being non-attached, although, since the narrators of the Epic do not tend to comment on characters' inner lives, they cannot be proved to be *asakta* actions. The second section assesses Kṛṣṇa's claim in terms of his divine actions. I argue that it is very hard to make sense of the claim as theological. This is because, as introduced in the text, the notions of being *asakta* and *sakta* are explained in terms of human action: these are anthropocentric notions and do not easily transfer to God except by anthropomorphising him<sup>10</sup> to the point of meaninglessness. Since Kṛṣṇa Almighty and a human person cannot be *asakta* in comparable ways, it is far from clear what use Kṛṣṇa Almighty's non-attachment might be in trying to persuade Arjuna to act *asakta*.

The final section of chapter six combines the findings of the first two sections by exploring the notion of *avatāra*, the link between the Epic and the divine Kṛṣṇas. Various interpretations of this notion are explored, leading to the conclusion that, as presented in the text, it is barely intelligible and confuses the argument. I establish a philosophically consistent interpretation of *avatāra*, but this is possible only by taking liberties with the text. The claim of Kṛṣṇa's divinity is sited in its historical context, and I show how the text's socio-religious purpose, by involving the deification of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, has interfered with its presentation of his human-attitudinal political philosophy.

In chapter seven I present the results of the thesis's argument. First I give an account of what *asakta karman* is according to the text. This *asakta karman* is by no means as straightforward or as religiously useful as previous commentaries have suggested. Nonetheless it is a curious idea, which I illustrate by differentiating absolutely and relatively *asakta* actions and by correlating the latter with the societal phase in human history. Next I sum the historical developments which I have hypothesised to illuminate different aspects of the text's discussions of *asakta karman*, and present a scheme of the text's thematic expansion, explaining this expansion in terms of the use of text as a socio-ideological tool. Then I assess the import of my research for the discipline of religious studies, and finish with some observations which may help to orient future research.

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<sup>10</sup> I refer to God as male because, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, Kṛṣṇa, a male, is God.

## Chapter two: Literature review

The literature relating to the *Bhagavadgītā* is enormous, and it has been impossible to survey all of it in the preparation of this thesis. In deciding what to read, I have often been guided by the bibliographical details given by scholars whose approach and focus is similar to my own. The further one goes into the past, however, the higher is the proportion of relevant works written in languages other than English (usually French or German), and not translated into English. I can read French very slowly and German not at all, so the literature reviewed in this chapter is necessarily English literature. I make no apology for this. There is only so much time available for the acquisition of languages necessary for one's research, and when that research is into a Sanskrit text it surely makes sense to spend as high a proportion of that time as possible studying Sanskrit. In this way, any deficiencies in my work due to my ignorance of European scholarly texts, will hopefully be counterbalanced by my understanding of ancient Indian ones. Further, since those European texts tend to be older ones, their main points and discoveries have generally been taken up and summarised in later texts written in English, even if this is often done in conjunction with lengthy untranslated quotations.

I do not wish to appear to be taking a parochial attitude here. Whilst it might suit me to have all Indologists write in English, there is no reason why others should write in English for my convenience any more than I should write in their languages for theirs. It is, however, a great advantage for scholarship as a whole if the results of research can be shared as easily as possible amongst scholars of many different backgrounds. To this end, it is convenient if scholars all write in a language that may be understood by as many other scholars as possible. In many ways the emergence of a single language for scholars goes hand in hand with the reduction of elitism in education, such that folk of many different backgrounds, whose education does not necessarily include a wide variety of modern languages, may nonetheless participate as scholars of ancient India. In her introduction to J. L. Brockington (2000:xxvi), Mary Brockington remarks that 'When the first of these articles was written, it was reasonable (and courteous) to assume that readers would have a working knowledge of Latin and the major European languages. This is no longer the case, so quotations from European scholars, and some Latin terms, have been translated into English or eliminated'. In wondering why 'this is no longer the case', some would no doubt appeal to falling standards in education, but I would be inclined to suggest, instead, that some of the elitist restrictions on who may be



a scholar and who may not, have, quite sensibly, been removed.

This chapter will not review all the literature I have surveyed in my research: many books and articles will be referred to, if at all, only in the following chapters, as and when they become relevant to the discussion and argument of the thesis. This chapter is intended to place the focus of my thesis within the context of existing and related scholarly discourses. Because of this, discussion of some important points of view may be cursory: it is only included at all insofar as it serves to orient the reader with respect to the chapters which follow.

### 2.1. Post-*Bhagavadgītā* Indian literature

One advantage of textual study is that there is an evolved fixedness to the object of scrutiny. It is far easier to define ‘the *Bhagavadgītā*’ than, for instance, ‘the legacy of Thatcherism’. The *Bhagavadgītā* is quite simply a certain combination of Sanskrit words: in an important sense, everyone who has read the *Bhagavadgītā* has read exactly the same thing. The text is fixed. It was fixed over a period of time, and came to be what it indisputably is. A closure has already taken place, hence the possibility of disclosure. To now disclose what the *Bhagavadgītā* is, is to explain how and why it came to take the form it does. The object of this thesis is thus historical. The thesis is not really interested in what happened to and with the *Bhagavadgītā* after it was fixed, and it shall be wary of the temptation to read later trends back into earlier periods. In other words, this study is not of any particular tradition of interpretation of the text, but of the text itself. The intention is to approach the text as a literary product, in the context of the *Mahābhārata* and, as outlined in the previous chapter, in the context of the interests and agendas of its editors.

It is very hard to study the *Bhagavadgītā*, and to bring other studies of it to bear on one’s own, without becoming immediately aware of the various Indian interpretations of the text. Once when I said I was studying the *Bhagavadgītā*, I was asked whose commentary I was studying, as if the *Bhagavadgītā* did not present itself for study except through the interpretive essays of others. In a sense this is true. How is it that I can study such a text? Because it has been preserved. In a way, then, to study it in isolation from the ways in which it has come to still exist for me as text, that is, through being interpreted being the cause or reason of its preservation, is to misunderstand what my study is. But as we have seen above, the conceit of study is

precisely that it is not study of one's study, but study of something different, some *x*. To construe *x* in relation to an individual person is commonly done in language with a verb: here it is 'to study', elsewhere it could be 'to talk / think about', 'to discourse upon, describe, represent'. The verb is problematic. Because what the reader of the study-report sees here is the artefact of text, a verb suggests itself as explanation of what the writer and student (signified here in terms of activity) has been doing. However, from the student's viewpoint, it is as if the verb did not exist, or as if *x* were to become an intransitive verb, 'to *x*'. And because we have an *x*, a root-text, it is possible, particularly for one not a religious Hindu, to have a methodology of bypassing much of what others have said about it.

The great medieval commentators composed their *bhāṣyas* in an atmosphere of sectarian rhetorical dispute (A. Sharma 1986, Sastri 1977, Sampatkumaran 1985, van Buitenen 1968, Lipner 1986, Mainkar 1969). *Bhāṣyas* legitimated religious and philosophical doctrine by deriving it from traditional root-texts, just as many of the strange etymologies and *bandhus*<sup>1</sup> of the Brāhmaṇas had legitimated various ritual ideas, more than a millenium previously, by deriving those ideas from traditional Vedic Saṃhitā texts. The ingenuity and persistence of medieval commentators was exercised in order to erect theological structures which presumably were associated with the politics of religious practice, which now included temple worship. *Vedāntic* argumentations concerning whether *dehin* is singular or plural and whether or not it is identical to the supreme *brahman*, though freely entered into by the commentators (Hirst 1993:121, van Buitenen 1968:50-53, Sastri 1977:252-253) are not really in sympathy with the concerns of the text itself, which seems to take the reality of Arjuna's predicament, and the desirability of liberation, for granted (similarly, the Buddha eschewed any speculation irrelevant to the praxis of removing *duḥkha*: Varma 1973:259-260, Rahula 1967:11-15). However, some of the points at issue in the milieu of the commentators seem to have arisen also in the milieu of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s composition. The question of whether or not inactivity was a vital part of the quest for liberation, which the *Bhagavadgītā* answers in the negative, was still alive for Śaṅkara, who inclines to the opposite view, and whose commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* is all the more impressive and salutary as a consequence: impressive because it must have involved considerable creative manipulation, and salutary because it shows us not to trust the commentators. Allied to this issue is the behaviour of the *jīvanmuktin*, the

<sup>1</sup> See Gonda 1965, Olivelle 1996:lii-ivi. The opening line of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 'dawn is the

individual who has achieved liberation<sup>2</sup> whilst still alive: both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, impressed by the institutions of renunciation, fail to imagine any behaviour for the *jīvanmuktin* (van Buitenen 1968:70-71, Sastri 1977:42-48, 499-516), but the *Bhagavadgītā* says he or she behaves conventionally and excellently (2:66, 3:7, 25). Other issues spanned both periods also: the anthropomorphisation of the originator of the world and activity is assessed differently by different *Vedāntic* schools, Śaṅkara's *advaita* insisting on the provisionality of such anthropomorphisation as well as that of the individuality of *ātman*, while various *dvaita* and *viśiṣṭādvaita* philosophers conceived of *mokṣa* much more in relational terms, and consequentially began to give the *ātman* an insoluble individuality and the Absolute a personality. In the case of this last issue, the *Bhagavadgītā* seems to have a strange viewpoint: stressing, on the one hand, the inexorable impersonality of *prakṛti* and *kāla*, it attempts to develop, on the other, a theological personality of Kṛṣṇa. This development is facilitated by the idea that Kṛṣṇa, an apparently human character in the narrative, is also the origin and ground of all activity: the idea of *avatāra*, the crossing-down or 'incarnation' of the Absolute, epitomises anthropomorphisation, allowing a congruence between the relation of devotee and deity here and now, and that of *ātman* and God in *mokṣa*. These two perspectives are both visible in the text, and this shows that the politics of religious practice, within which the medieval commentators must be understood, also affected the composition or compiling and editing of the *Bhagavadgītā*. If the root-text had not been so well known, and if the commentators had not had such (Vedic) reverence for it, we can easily imagine them adjusting it and grafting in interpretive glosses. Through an appreciation of the kinds of issues concerning medieval religious commentators, we can begin to understand the issues concerning the *Bhagavadgītā*'s composition, particularly if we are open to the possibility that the text has been subject to thorough, but unacknowledged, editorial activity. The history of the text's interpretation is methodologically instructive for this thesis, despite not being its focus.

If famous old *Bhagavadgītābhāṣyas* were constrained by the doctrinal position of the interpreter in the context of religious politics, the process of contextual and positional bias can be seen to extend to more recent Indian commentaries, many of which also arose in contexts of religious politics. The renaissance of Hinduism in recent

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head of the sacrificial horse', immediately establishes cosmology as a ritual discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Or the individual whose *ātman* has achieved liberation. What is meant here is clear, since the continuing individuality of the human person is enough to hang the *ātman* on. The question of the post-mortem persistence of individuality in *mokṣa* is quite different.

centuries was in some degree a response to European colonialism, and to 'the current social, philosophical and religious ideas streaming in from the west' (Lipner 1994:64: see also Spear 1965:158-168). An intellectual attempt was made to construct an Indian identity in contradistinction to European identity but somehow on the same model,<sup>3</sup> with the Veda, rather than the Bible, as its orienting nucleus.<sup>4</sup> Many of the protagonists of this attempt (which is still being made), such as Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekananda, Dayananda Sarasvati, Tilak, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, were in many ways political figures. The last three of these have written closely and extensively on the *Bhagavadgītā* (Tilak 1936, Gandhi 1946, 1960, 1965, Desai 1946, Radhakrishnan 1948, 1989:I.519-580, Thomas 1987). Tilak and Gandhi's argumentation is not as formally philosophical as that of the medieval commentators, and is concerned to unite Hindus under a universal ethic of active and selfless responsibility. Radhakrishnan's purpose was that of a diplomatic intellectual, an essayist on Hinduism for the west (Cox 2002). His interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, like most modern Indian interpretations, is an essentially *Vedāntic* one, derived from the medieval commentators, centred on the *ātman-brahman* relationship, and tending to a mystical or spiritual rather than a practical philosophy of human action. We see here in the history of the text three stages of engagement with the text: the editors and composers, the medieval commentators and the modern ones were all operating in a religio-political framework where what they did, said or wrote was overdetermined by their practical purposes. There is an unavoidable bias in work done on the *Bhagavadgītā* within and for the Indian cultural context: this context, after all, was partly formed by the text, partly consists of the tradition of commenting upon the text, and thus imparts a self-selective bias. Modern commentators take for granted the work of the medieval ones, who took for granted the work of the text's editors, who took for granted the texts they edited. Crucially, at two stages of this commentatorial tree there is an extra-Hindu encounter to explain the engagement with text: the creators of the *Mahābhārata* engineered a new Indian polity in the face of successive Buddhist and foreign kingdoms, just as the modern Hindu

<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that the model for one identity was copied from the other: in many ways this model is the only possible one for constructing the identity of nations, civilisations and traditions, and even of micro-traditions such as the operative traditions of thought and action of any individual person. On this last point, see Brodbeck and Pupynin 2001. In the construction of self-identity the self becomes a token of a type, whose others must be comparable. This is so however micro or macro self might be.

<sup>4</sup> Lipner 1994:63: 'Except for outposts of Vedic chanting in various parts of India, and for specialist study of the *śruti* in scattered contexts, and indeed, for the generally undiminished status of the Vedas as the scriptural authority symbol, the Vedas had ceased to be a source of religious inspiration for the majority of Hindus by the beginning of the nineteenth century'. We may question whether they even were such a source for the majority prior to this.

reformists did in the face of British rule. Thus an appreciation of the politics of modern Hinduism, and of text as a tool in that politics, furnishes a potentially useful paradigm for understanding the creation of the *Bhagavadgītā* as we have it.

An appreciation of the politics of modern Hinduism is also helpful in understanding some writers who have suggested that the *Bhagavadgītā* will be misunderstood except under a sympathetic Hindu reading, dismissing 'western'<sup>5</sup> interpretation of the *Bhagavadgītā* as ideological colonialism. This suggestion can be allied with the recent critique of orientalist discourse (Said 1978), and is a methodological paradigm, perhaps comparable to that of participant observation in the discipline of anthropology, which takes issue with the supposed impartiality of the external observer. So for example Patel (1991:9) debunks studies that have tried to understand the *Bhagavadgītā* in its historical and chronological context, claiming instead that the text's 'underlying tradition' is 'ahistoric', and thus privileging the understanding of those who may be part of it. He does not, however, suggest grounds on which a claim to represent such an ahistoric tradition might be judged, or by whom, and that is the drawback of this methodology of the insider. When there are so many obviously historic traditions at work, how does one recognise whether the tradition in which one is engaging with the text is the appropriate ahistoric one or not? It might seem to both Patel and myself that, being a product of modern European positivism, I am singularly unqualified to comment meaningfully on the *Bhagavadgītā*. But if Patel is right, I may easily explain him, or any other current commentator, as a product of modern some-other-ism, and disqualify him also. An ahistoric tradition is such a bizarre idea that there is no way of relating it to one historical person or group rather than to another. The methodology of the insider founders on defining what it is to be an insider: the methodology of the outsider does not founder on definition because it is only a so-called methodology of the outsider, the distinction having been invented by the opponent.

No modern commentator can be shown to be an insider: the text, after all, is old, and is read out of context by all who now deal with it. It is thus hasty to assume that the biases of the modern Hindu tradition necessarily match or even resemble those of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The term 'Hindu', originally a geographical term used by the Persians to describe those dwelling beyond the river Indus, first acquired a religio-cultural sense in

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<sup>5</sup>This term is obscure (one can travel westwards from London and reach Benares), purporting to define in terms of geography but alluding to an aggressively 'rational', capitalistic and imperialistic empiricism seen as originating in Europe and now epitomised by America.

the time of the early Muslim empires in India, indicating those who were non-Muslim, non-Buddhist and non-Greek, and whose society was often characterised as *brāhmaṇic* (Lipner 1994:9-10, 326). Fifteen hundred years or so previously, a process of identity-building was required in the face of the renunciative ideology which lies at the root of Jainism and Buddhism, and diverse strands were woven together to establish the *brāhmaṇic* socio-religious orthodoxy and orthopraxy which the Muslims would later call 'Hindu'. The Hinduism which exists today is not primordial: the watershed from which it developed was a historical event of uniting many different traditions in an attempt to protect a certain type of society from a threat, be this represented as the external threat of foreign invasions and rulers,<sup>6</sup> or as the internal threat of widespread ascetic renunciation and neglect of *dharma*. The *Mahābhārata* is in its present form a key text of this enterprise of unification.<sup>7</sup> The text was built up over a period of several centuries, drawing on various oral traditions to enlarge and reinterpret its story. The result is a juxtaposition, a co-presentation of differing traditions, military, political, philosophical, gnostic, soteriological, devotional, and ritual, all partially interpreted in the light of the others, and offered together as one tradition. As Johnson says (1998:xv), 'the broad influence or concerns of certain dominant groups in Indian society, and their attempts to 'take over' the text, or parts of it, are not difficult to detect in much of the *Mahābhārata*'. Thus, if the Hindu tradition is used as a lens through which to view the *Bhagavadgītā*, this may be tantamount to collusion with the *brāhmaṇical* editing process,<sup>8</sup> which co-opted the text for religious purposes, and may deafen the commentator to earlier textual traditions and quieter voices preserved in it.

The Hindu religious paradigm embodied by the edited *Mahābhārata* has persisted up to the present day, and India has also had success in exporting it. Yet to assert that ancient Indian texts cannot be understood except under this paradigm is to overlook the fact that there are traces in those texts of a time before that paradigm was established, a time of realism, of politics, practical philosophy, diplomacy and military action, more secular than one might expect to find in a sacred text. It is therefore inappropriate in the

<sup>6</sup> Parpola 2001 suggests that the Pāṇḍavas themselves represent pale-skinned, Iranian-speaking, megalithic invaders.

<sup>7</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā* accommodates renunciation as renunciation of the *phala* (fruits) of action, not of action itself. With the innovation of the *āśrama* system (see Olivelle 1993) *brāhmaṇical* society accommodated renunciation as a phase of life pursued after, not instead of, a period of ritual and social responsibility.

<sup>8</sup> There is little doubt that the main redactors of the *Mahābhārata* were Bhārgava and / or Āṅgīrasa *brāhmaṇas*. See Shende 1943, Sukthankar 1936, Goldman 1971, Minkowski 1991, Hildebeitel 1999, 2001 and below, 2.3.

case of the *Mahābhārata* to prejudice a non-Hindu approach (though this may not be so in the same way with some later texts). It must be acknowledged that it is Hindu faith-communities who have preserved and transmitted the texts, and that researchers therefore have them to thank for any pleasure and progress they may derive from their studies. However, this does not make it unethical to bypass orthodox Hindu understanding of the text: from a historical and academic viewpoint, much is to be gained from an approach which seeks to secularise the origins of sacred texts, just as, from certain other points of view, much may be gained from other approaches. The Salman Rushdie affair demonstrated that it can sometimes be impractical to disregard possible orthodox reception: such disregard cannot, however, be called unethical, since orthodoxies are many and diverse. The text is now preserved also by libraries: unorthodox interpretations do not arise from contempt for the religious realities of others, but from an earnest desire to maintain the text's integrity.

## 2.2. Theological interpretations of the *Bhagavadgītā*

European interpretations of the *Bhagavadgītā* have, in the main, been overwhelmingly theological. In this they may be guilty of a category mistake. To be sure, the text is presented by Hindus as a religio-philosophical one, but this also is an interpretation. In the first instance the text is just text, and if it seems somewhat preoccupied with religio-philosophical matters, then the explanation for this is presumably to be found in the context in which it first functioned. There is in any case a difference between the religio-philosophical thinking of ancient times, the religio-philosophical thinking of recent Hindu cultures, and the theological thinking of the earliest European translators and commentators of the *Bhagavadgītā*. These commentators were often theologians, specialists in Christian religion and doctrine. They set the tone for subsequent European translations and treatments.

The *Bhagavadgītā* was first translated into English by Charles Wilkins in 1785 (Sharpe 1985). Subsequent translators include Telang (1908), Hill (1928), Edgerton (1946), Prabhavananda and Isherwood (1947), Radhakrishnan (1948), Mascaro (1962), E. Deutsch (1968), Zaehner (1969), Goyandka (1969), de Nicolás (1976a), Bolle (1979), van Buitenen (1981), Sargeant (1984), Gotshalk (1985), Miller (1986), D. White (1989), and Johnson (1994). While Indian translators, as mentioned above, tend to view the text through a *Vedāntic* lens, European translators have instead used the European

terms of religious and theological discourse as tools for understanding it. The choice of these tools was natural since the context in which the text was phenomenologically encountered was a religious one, that is, the *Bhagavadgītā* was first known to Europeans as a sacred text of the Hindu religion. Once the text had been presented in English in these terms, the way was open for comparative religious studies of the type demonstrated by Olivelle (1964), who analyses the idea of God in the *Bhagavadgītā* according to its compatibility with orthodox Christian doctrines of God's unity, omnipotence, omniscience and so on. To perform such analysis from a Christian viewpoint is to have an attitude to the text that may not be helpful, for the analyst may find it hard not to pass a value judgement, consciously or subconsciously, upon the text as worthy or not of being held sacred. If the text is to be judged as worthy of being held sacred, a judgement which might be encouraged by an anti-colonialist or anti-orientalist intention, then particular exegetical strategies may be required in order to square the text with the orthodox Christian view. Such strategies are of the same type as those used to square biblical texts with the orthodox view, and those used in medieval India to square ancient texts with views vying for orthodoxy.

Thus the *Bhagavadgītā* was presented in English in Christian theological terms, and articles duly followed discussing whether the text is theistic or pantheistic (Urquhart 1914), whether or not it establishes a firm foundation for religious worship (Jordens 1964) and for ethical behaviour (Lipner 1997), and whether the spiritual path it describes is primarily one of works, devotion or knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The tendency to value the text has certainly increased since European missionaries first came across it, but, as Eder says (1988:27), 'much of the change of opinion regarding the *Bhagavadgītā* had little to do with gaining a better understanding of the *Bhagavadgītā*, involving instead externalist influences in the intellectual community to which the *Bhagavadgītā* was a scrutinised guest. Much of the western scholarly effort appears as an attempt to properly seat the *Bhagavadgītā* at the table of religious / scriptural studies'. Eder also says (p. 25) that 'at present, scholars have made only meagre beginnings towards a critical analysis of the *Bhagavadgītā*', and urges that the text be studied 'within its original cultural moment' (p. 25). He calls for 'a critical study of the text which does not begin by

<sup>9</sup> Sarma 1962:121, Zaehner 1969:24-36, de Smet 1975:28 and J. L. Brockington 1981:59 stress the primacy of *bhakti*, although Sarma leans towards the view of Minor 1980, who sees works, devotion and knowledge as mutually reinforcing aspects of a single path. Radhakrishnan 1948:59 and Zimmer 1951:405 see devotion and knowledge as appropriate for different types of people, but in so doing imply a value judgement against practitioners of the former. Whereas Zimmer sees *bhaktiyoga* and *jñānayoga* as subdivisions of *karmayoga*, Śāṅkara thinks that *jñānayoga* should eventually lead to the renunciation of *karman* (see above, 2.1).



assuming the religious importance of the *Bhagavadgītā* due to its theological content' (p. 41). This thesis hopes to be just such a study, and to be so by placing theology within the context of a 'sensitivity for the rhetorical qualities of the dialogue' (p. 32).

The paucity of the theological approach is demonstrated by the disagreements in European scholarship over what the text reveals the 'nature of the divine' to be, and therefore over what its overall (theological) meaning and import is. These disagreements can be seen as a continuation of the sectarian disagreements of medieval India, which are paradigmatic of the theological approach. When analysed with a range of possible exegetic and hermeneutic strategies, the text can be made to have any number of theological points of view,<sup>10</sup> and it may be observed that there is often a relationship of near identity between the scholar's personal beliefs and their interpretation of the text. Monists find it to be a monistic document, theists find it to be a theistic one, and so on. Asking the question 'who has made this particular interpretation?' reveals an interesting correlation, and opens up the possibility of deconstructing interpretations.

Thus many scholars have seemed to approach the text with the assumption that it contains a more or less unified message or philosophy concerned with the nature of the divine. Where this is not a clear assumption it is often discernible as a desire on the part of the interpreter to have this be so.<sup>11</sup> What is the origin of this assumption? Perhaps the knowledge that the text is sacred. It has been suggested above, however, that much of the text was not originally held in such a lofty kind of esteem, which may have arisen only at the time of the compilation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, that is, at the time when the text was co-opted as part of a social project. The implication is that those texts are sacred which have been created as sacred as they are being created (or compiled, in the present case), and that the production and presentation of a sacred text is the by-product of a social project. Consider, for example, the Bible, the Avesta, the *Tipiṭaka*, the Torah, the Koran and the *Bhagavadgītā*: in each case it is possible to identify some historical social project with which the production and exact compilation of the text was closely connected.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, none of the social projects which gave birth to these texts in

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<sup>10</sup> A. Sharma 1986:x calls this property of a text multivalency. In the final analysis it may be a property not of the text but of the way it is analysed.

<sup>11</sup> See Williams and McElvaney 1988, which studies the interpretations of Aurobindo and Zaeher, and shows that both saw the *Bhagavadgītā* primarily as a promulgator of timeless mystical / theological truths.

<sup>12</sup> A thorough justification of this point would require a thesis of its own. See Thapar 1961:144-145 for Buddhism, Thompson 2000 for Judaism, Burckhardt 1949 for Christianity. Interestingly, the social

their sacred form have quite been abandoned: the sacredness of the text guarantees the life of the project, since the text was created as sacred *for* the project. But this certainly does not mean that the social project and the sacredness of the text provide an adequate background for the understanding of the text: the *Mahābhārata* may have been formed by adjusting and compiling existing texts, whose prehistory is vital in their interpretation. Likewise with the other texts that have been mentioned. Those who make the assumption of theological unity (or even coherence) in the text are liable to underestimate the diverse origins of the text itself.

We have seen how, since medieval times, interpretations of the *Bhagavadgītā* have been produced in service to several different traditions, all of them foreign to that of the text itself. This foreignness is best explained in terms of the non-theological nature of the text. Although the text clearly talks about different ideas of the Absolute, this does not yet amount to a theological issue. Perhaps only with Rāmānuja did the *Bhagavadgītā*'s concerns begin to be interpreted as theological ones: this then became the starting point for European interpretations with their theological bias. Such a bias is particularly applicable because we have, in the text, a man who is God, and speaking as such: as soon as the notion of *avatāra* appears, theology beckons, but nonetheless the soteriology of the attainment of *mokṣa*, of becoming *brahman* and not being reborn, operated successfully in many non-theistic contexts in the Upaniṣads and, under different terminology, in Buddhism and Jainism. When the theomorphisation of human beings became linked with this soteriology, it was natural for texts to take the viewpoint given at 12:1-7, describing an anthropomorphised Absolute as more accessible to human imagination and thus suggesting theism as a soteriological tool. Following this anthropomorphisation we then have the attainment of *mokṣa* portrayed as a gift of love from God, and so on and so forth.

The notion of a personalised Absolute was put to use in explaining the workings of *karmic* retribution. As Bronkhorst has shown (1999, 2000:49-53), the notion of an omniscient and omnipotent God could explain the otherwise obscure question of how *karmic* continuity was ensured. The *Bhagavadgītā* uses the idea of Kṛṣṇa for this purpose at 9:22, 27-28 and at 16:19, but elsewhere in the text the continuity of *karman* is presented as a self-operative law. Bronkhorst elegantly shows that the problem of

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projects here described all seek culturally to unify fissiparous groups: if the existence of sacred texts is said to indicate the presence of religion, then the aspect of religion here invoked is contained within the institutional mechanisms of political centralisation. More will be said about the *Mahābhārata*'s social project below, 2.3.

*karmic* continuity led to two different types of solutions: the theistic type outlined here, which, as he points out (1999:16), reduces the problem to one of God's psychology, and the idealistic type, such as that embraced by Buddhism, where the results of past deeds exist only in the realm of mental events and have no external reality.<sup>13</sup> He thus traces the origins of Indian idealism and Indian theism to attempts to explain the unquestioned operation of *karman*. The *Sāṃkhya* school rejected both of these types of solution: it maintained a realistic outlook and was of the opinion that the theistic solution was no solution at all (Bronkhorst 2000:62). It is thus clear that ideological commitment to a *saṃsāra / mokṣa* worldview with unquestioned *karmic* continuity predated any philosophical or theological innovations in its defence. The *Sāṃkhya* school, and most of the mentions of *karmic* retribution in the *Bhagavadgītā*, preserve the original, unproblematised attitude to the workings of *karman*, as natural and not in need of any further explanation. Whether the perceived problems with *karmic* continuity were actually responsible for the introduction of theism, as Bronkhorst suggests in the case of the *Vaiśeṣika* school of philosophy, or whether theism arose for other reasons and was co-opted into the *karmic* debate, it can be argued that theism is adventitious to Indian thought. The foundation of Indian soteriology is the operation of *karman* and the possibility of escaping from its purview, and if Indian soteriology is to be examined from the perspective of a Judaeo-Christian culture whose soteriological foundation is theism, then it is perhaps understandable, though certainly undesirable, that the theological elements in Indian thought should be concentrated on in the way they have been by European commentators.

### 2.3. The debate about the composition of the *Mahābhārata*

The theological approach also underestimates the situatedness of the *Bhagavadgītā* in the *Mahābhārata*, and its narrative status as a response to a question of human action. It is important to try to understand at the outset what genre of text is being dealt with, and to see the *Bhagavadgītā* in its textual context, the *Mahābhārata*,<sup>14</sup> as well as in its

<sup>13</sup> See *Dhammapada* 1:1-2: 'Dhammas are preceded by mind, ruled by mind, made up of mind. If one speaks or acts with polluted mind, *dukkha* follows, like the wheel the ox's foot... If one speaks or acts with pure mind, *sukha* follows like a never departing shadow'.

<sup>14</sup> Van Buitenen 1981 takes this line when he calls his translation 'the *Bhagavadgītā* in the *Mahābhārata*', and translates the whole of the *Mahābhārata*'s 'Book of the *Bhagavadgītā*', half as long again as the 'official' *Bhagavadgītā*, as well as the beginning of the following 'Book of the slaying of Bhīṣma'. This does not really give much literary context for the *Bhagavadgītā*: the bare minimum in this regard would seem to be the entire *Mahābhārata*, which is disturbingly large and has no adequate complete

historical context. Whatever place it may have come to assume in the religious consciousness of India and of the human race in general, it is presented first and foremost as an episode in a story, a story which may have pre-existed the social project that made it sacred. In order that this be fully understood, a digression follows concerning the different natures of Indian texts.

The Vedas are *śruti*. Their syllables are sacred and cosmically effective in a mysterious way. They were heard (*śruti*) by ṛṣis at the beginning of time, since when they have been passed down verbatim by families of *brāhmaṇas*, who officiate at rituals using them, in a tradition unbroken to the present day. In the Hindu tradition, the Vedas are ahistoric: their only context is the cosmos as a whole. Their preservation and ritual use does not in any way depend on anyone 'knowing what they mean' (in the sense that one knows *fromage* means 'cheese' by also knowing what cheese is). Some of the speculations of the *Brāhmaṇas* might indeed suggest to the critical reader that the Vedic *Samhitās* have been preserved without the parallel preservation of the structures within which they originally were meaningful. In the first place, the hymns were used at the sacrifice: later they were assumed to be *about* it.

The *Mahābhārata*, along with all other non-Vedic texts, is *smṛti*. It seems to have originated in a separate oral tradition,<sup>15</sup> which was martial and courtly rather than priestly, whose guardians were bards, and whose purpose was entertainment and edification. The context of this oral tradition is historical and social. In this tradition texts were not passed down verbatim, but were given individual emphasis and interpretation by its particular performers depending on the audience and the wider social and cultural context. Whereas the *brāhmaṇas* can fulfil their social (*i.e.* ritual) function without any other contact with society, the bards, in their continual need for new understandings of their texts appropriate to new audiences, must interpret at every stage and must therefore be in touch with wider social issues. Thus *smṛti* can contain material that has been continuously created and reworked for a long time. The need to provide a contemporary, appropriate version of a tale, coupled with the utmost respect for tradition (which is a prerequisite of transmission in the first place), often leads to a tendency for these texts to expand, and to embody contradictions.

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English translation. Hence the tendency to decontextualise.

<sup>15</sup> Hildebeitel 2001:19 dismisses claims for prior oral Epic, but while this allows him to subject the text to an analysis in terms of literary theory, he does not properly examine the relation between the Epic's writers and existing non-*śruti* oral traditions. His view will be discussed further anon: in brief, my view is that Epic and novel are very different genres and thus call for different analytic tools.

The *Mahābhārata*, unlike most *smṛti* texts, suggests a tradition of heroic Epic (J. D. Smith 1980). Although little is known about the social contexts within which this tradition originally functioned, heroic Epic seems to have been a worldwide phenomenon, generated and performed in the courts of warrior kings (Sidhanta 1929). In the Indian tradition the bards most commonly associated with this genre are the *sūtas*, who were the offspring of *brāhmaṇa* / *kṣatriya* unions and who also served as royal charioteers. This dual function points to the occasional need for moral support of the warrior through his companion's recitation of heroic deeds of the past. In the *Mahābhārata* there are several examples of formulaic speeches to strengthen the resolve of dithering warriors, either immediately before battle or whilst trying to work out whether military action is appropriate in the first place.<sup>16</sup> Many of these speeches have elements in common with the *Bhagavadgītā*, most notably the appeal to *kṣatriyadharmā* and the ignominy that will result from cowardice: some have phrases and whole *pādas* in common, showing that this sub-genre was well used enough to have developed its own formulae.<sup>17</sup>

Of course the *sūtas* were not the only group in ancient India apart from the *brāhmaṇas* who carefully preserved oral texts.<sup>18</sup> The *Mahābhārata* contains material from diverse textual sources. Some of these (manuals of kingly behaviour, *etc.*) were clearly courtly, but there is evidence of folk tradition as well as of philosophical and gnostic traditions.<sup>19</sup> Many wandering ascetics drop in to dispense their wisdom to the heroes, in forms which suggest that such wisdom texts were preserved artefacts.

It is extremely important, when studying *smṛti*, to appreciate what happens to it

<sup>16</sup> Some examples are given here. 2.14-15: Bhīma, Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna strengthen Yudhiṣṭhira's resolve to fight Jarāsaṃdha. 3.28-36: Draupadī and Bhīma attempt to spur Yudhiṣṭhira to prematurely challenge the Kauravas. 4.36, 41: Arjuna attempts to strengthen Uttara's resolve to fight the Kauravas. 5.3-4: Sātyaki and Drupada urge Yudhiṣṭhira to retake the kingdom. 5.130-134: Kuntī urges Yudhiṣṭhira to fight, repeating the speech which Vidurā made to her son Saṃjaya urging him to continue military action (Saṃjaya here is a different Saṃjaya to the one who narrates the battle, and the *Bhagavadgītā*, to the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra).

<sup>17</sup> Oral Epics rely very much on the use of formulae: see Lord 1960, Finnegan 1977, J. L. Brockington 2000:98-125, 339-352.

<sup>18</sup> Hazra 1955 suggests that the *aśvamedha* ritual originally included daily recitations by *brāhmaṇa* lute players, but that these performers fell out with their patrons and became more freelance, intermarrying with other praise-singers to form the class of *sūtas*, thus bringing together two different oral traditions, one of *brāhmaṇa* and one of *kṣatriya* origin.

<sup>19</sup> The cosmological and cosmogonical speculations in the *Bhagavadgītā*, the Upaniṣads and the later books of the Vedic Saṃhitās bear witness to a tradition of texts recording competitions of compositions about certain mysteries. See Huizinga 1949:127-132ff., who thinks that Ṛgveda 10.129:6ab ('who truly knows, who will here declare, whence and how this creation was born?') throws down the gauntlet for a riddle-solving contest. The variety of views then recorded would confound any unitive interpretation.

when writing comes into widespread use: thematic conservatism may all at once be replaced by verbatim conservatism. This transition from orality to literacy is well described by Ong (1967: see also J. L. Brockington 1999a). Whereas oral traditions could accommodate several different types of text, maintained in different ways, there is no literary equivalent of the bardic interpretive tradition. Once a bardic text is written down, it is frozen at that stage, and is liable to be treated as if the exact wording and presentation of its themes are of paramount importance. Any subsequent development will not be in the context of performance but will occur only by deliberately adding, subtracting or modifying verses. It is therefore necessary to visualise as closely as possible the circumstances in which the text came to be exactly how it is, that is, the hows and whys of its compilation, writing down, and authoritative status. Without such visualisation, 'understanding' the text is an empty idea. There may have been several editing stages since it was put into writing. There were certainly many editing stages before that point. In an important sense, every single bardic performance was itself a stage in the development and expansion of the text. The *Mahābhārata* views itself as an object expanding through time, referring to itself at three stages of this process.<sup>20</sup>

Lord (1953) has drawn attention to the process of transforming a bard's tale into written form. The situation and audience of an individual performance will constrain the bard's rendition of his tale, encouraging him to gloss over certain sections and to expand others. When the bard must now perform for a scribe, who will note down everything he says and preserve it for any and all imaginary future audiences, his natural skill of catering for the audience will encourage him to pour forth all his different versions of a tale combined as one, and to record an extended and fully developed super-tale, the whole library of narrative elements of which any live performance of the tale would be a small, spontaneously compiled selection. If the dictating bard is one who has experience of performing for a large variety of audiences, and who therefore can explain a tale in very different ways, then his written tale may be expected to present any narrative event in many different ways at once. Such 'oral dictated texts' may then embody contradictions, which cannot be blamed on the bard, since to any specific audience he would have presented a shorter and more coherent tale, but which a later editor of the text will have difficulty removing.<sup>21</sup> Lord's points

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<sup>20</sup> See *Mahābhārata* 1.1:55-64. Three editors (or presenters) are named by the text. Many scholars have made much of this division: see Sukthankar 1936. This will be discussed further below.

<sup>21</sup> The existence of multiple audiences might lead a bard to introduce inconsistencies in oral performance through conflation of performances previously given in differing contexts, quite aside from the question of dictating for a scribe. Dumézil 1970:125 says that inconsistencies are 'frequent in Epic

here are of great interest to the present literary-historical study, since the *Bhagavadgītā* probably began as part of an oral text, became written, is inconveniently long (certainly for its narrative situation), and is philosophically diffuse (Iyengar 1926).

At the end of the historical process of expansion of the text, Kṛṣṇa emerges as the supreme God. It is likely that once Kṛṣṇa-worship was a fact amongst the *Mahābhārata*'s audience, any subsequent editors would have paid particular attention to the *Bhagavadgītā*, where words could be placed in the mouth of God himself at the most critical moment of the story. Any pressing disputes or issues in society at large could have been resolved by editors resolving them here, in the words of this character.

If the process of the text's creation is envisaged along these lines, good reasons can be adduced for not expecting it to present a single, unified view. Such an expectation would be based on a mistaken idea of how the text came into being. As A. Sharma (1986:ix-xxx) has shown, the text is multivalent. This being the case, great care is needed in deciding what kinds of questions are to be asked of the text, for if questions are asked that were not being asked by its authors and editors, and that in all probability would not have made much sense to them, then easy answers are unlikely to be forthcoming.

The methodology being suggested here seeks to hypothesise a date at which the text was fixed, and only explain the text using considerations that can reasonably be placed at or before this date. There are various problems involved with this approach which should be mentioned at this stage. Firstly, the text was fixed only this century, with the production of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* (Sukthankar, Belvalkar, Vaidya *et al.* 1933-1972). The critical edition seeks to remove the discrepancies that have arisen as a result of the widespread dissemination of written *Mahābhāratas* throughout India and the establishment of different written textual traditions, each adjusting and developing the text in the comparatively recent past according to local interests. The implication is that there were two phases in the development of the *Mahābhārata*: one in which the text became a written and relatively stable *Mahābhārata*, and the other in which the dissemination of this written text led to differing manuscript traditions. Now, the present study is only interested in the first of these phases, and therefore it is extremely fortuitous not only that a critical edition exists, but that it has been so well received that van Buitenen can claim (1978:151) that

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narratives, which prove[s] that the poets sought to make use of a variant, precious from other points of view, of what they had already recited'.

‘the text of the critical edition takes us back to a text of about the sixth century A.D., fluid no doubt but, considering its size, of remarkable consistency’. It is precisely because these two different phases of development occurred for different reasons and in different ways, and are separated by the widespread writing-down of *smṛti* texts, that their differentiation was both possible and desirable, and the critical edition achieves exactly that differentiation. The rationale behind the production of the critical edition is therefore commensurate with the historical approach,<sup>22</sup> and the present study will uncritically use the critical edition as if it were what it purports to be, a sixth-century text. Such a policy is now followed by most *Mahābhārata* scholars, with the happy consequence that everyone is able to refer to the same text. An unavoidable problem here is that any errors in the critical edition will be compounded in this study.<sup>23</sup> Further, the critical edition may give a misleading idea of what the text is, by presenting it as one definitive text, when in fact this is precisely what it has never quite been.

A second problem with the historical approach is that, having hypothesised a date at which the text was fixed, that is, a final editing date, and having thus suggested that every development before this time could have impacted on any part of the text, it is nonetheless inevitable that some sections of text attained the form in which they appear in the critical edition before others. As the *Mahābhārata* grew, editors would leave more and more of it in the form in which they received it. This naturally raises questions concerning the relative antiquity of different passages and *ślokas*. The prehistory of the text is malleable: by constructing plausible chronologies, a variety of different pictures can be imagined of its social background and of the editorial agendas which produced it. Of course this is not a problem in that it offers the fascinating possibility of sketchily reconstructing a long and otherwise murky period in Indian history, and of correlating that reconstruction with a detailed diachronic analysis of a text thought to have been developing throughout that period. The problem arises because it is difficult to establish a detailed and precise enough rationale for assigning text passages to different layers of the *Mahābhārata*’s construction. In most cases a *śloka* will simply not contain enough

<sup>22</sup> Van Buitenen 1978:152: ‘Some are interested in the text as one of the few world Epics, others in the restructuring of Vedic society, still others in population movements, the early history of Kṛṣṇaism, the sources of Śaivism, the beginnings of Indian philosophy, etc. For them the sixth-century text as the earliest one recoverable is an invaluable source of information, and its homogenisation with later Purāṇic text is completely detrimental to, if not destructive of, what little evidence is left’. In contrast, those more interested in the mythological content of the *Mahābhārata* than the history of its ideas (Biardeau is the most salient example) have less to gain from the critical edition, since even recent textual variants are of value to them.

<sup>23</sup> There undoubtedly are such errors: see J. L. Brockington 2000:195-217 for a critique of the *Rāmāyaṇa* critical edition.



evidence to suggest its precise antiquity, except if that evidence is magnified or distorted by preconceived and as-yet-unproven images of what the historical background might have been. It is also difficult to agree on what kinds of linguistic features constitute evidence for dating a passage to a particular period: there is evidence of deliberate archaism in some Sanskrit literature (van Buitenen 1966), and philological studies of the text have been increasingly weighed down by a confidence-sapping methodological in-fighting.

The sheer variety of apparently plausible views of the text's construction constitutes the greatest drawback of the so-called analytic approach to the composition of the *Mahābhārata*, based as this is upon the idea that the text took shape over a period perhaps exceeding 1500 years (Johnson 1998:xii). This approach was widely taken, with certain important exceptions, by German scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in the English-language tradition is best exemplified by Hopkins (1901). Despite numerous disagreements at almost every stage of proceedings, the analytic approach is still very much with us, and this thesis will find it impossible to make sense of the *Bhagavadgītā* except by hypothesising, on philosophical grounds, that different sections and ideas were introduced at different stages.

It is clear that if an attempt is to be made to divide and order the fragments making up the text, then it must be accompanied by a detailed (and preferably also independently corroborated) account, not only of the socio-historical situations from which those fragments arose, but also of the socio-historical situation in which those particular fragments and not others were incorporated into the text. This last condition is fulfilled particularly well by considering the possible socio-political motivations of the text's later editors.

The identification of different historical text layers has often been resisted, for several reasons. It has been questioned whether the text is uneven enough to demand a theory of interpolations in the first place; what, in the absence of the possibility of its verification, the status of any particular theory of interpolations might be; and whether or not certain scholars are really engaging with the text as a *bona fide* literary product, rather than just casually using it to bolster a pet historical reconstruction. This last question is particularly incisive when it is considered how much a scholar's personal ideology might privilege certain types of historical reconstruction. Van Held (1935:176), reacting against the analytic approach, declared that 'the discriminating between a number of different elements in the construction of the Epic must be devoid

of all sense unless the student gets to know how it was that the various elements thus discriminated could have been brought together and united so as to constitute such a uniform whole'. Of course the text is a 'uniform whole' in some ways and not in others, but, all things considered, Held's claim is a sound one. It is exactly this historical process of bringing elements together that this thesis will attempt to outline. The modern interpreter has at his or her fingertips the fruits of more research on the socio-historical background of the text than ever before, and so the hows and whys of different layers of text coexisting in the *Mahābhārata* will be better explained today than when Held was writing.

M. C. Smith (1972, 1992) has advanced the thesis that those passages of the *Mahābhārata* composed in the irregular ('Vedic') *triṣṭubh* metre (about 2000 verses out of 400,000) constitute the ancient *kṣatriya* core of the text upon which the remainder is a *brāhmaṇical* commentatorial aggregation. Whilst changes in metre may quite naturally suggest a passage from one layer of text to another,<sup>24</sup> Smith's assumption that all passages in a certain metre are in fact one layer, laid out in order with no sections missing, is simplistic. The historical implications she draws are accordingly idiosyncratic: many of the sections she thinks of as ancient (for example the Yayāti story of 1.82-88, the Aṣṭāvakra story of 3.132-134, and Saṃjaya's peace mission of 5.22-32) are deemed by other analysts to be comparatively recent. Nonetheless the idea that the Epic began as a *kṣatriya* text and was gradually appropriated by *brāhmaṇas* has been extremely popular.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the preponderance of the analytic approach, Hildebeitel (1999, 2001) has recently suggested that the Epics were 'written by *brāhmaṇas* over a much shorter period than is usually advanced' (1999:155), and that, rather than having grown up over a long period, 'their composition is done from a standpoint that reflects back over a long period' (p. 156). He thus implicitly locates himself in the synthetic tradition begun with Dahmann, and, in his defence, cites Alles (1989), Alter's work on Biblical narrative (1981), and Biardeau. Hildebeitel's objection to the analytical approach would seem to be twofold: firstly, that the postulation of different text layers unnecessarily complicates the question of composition, and secondly, that this complication is in some way due to 'colonialist and 'comparative religions' historiography and apologetics' (p. 155), or, in

<sup>24</sup> Analysis of compositional layers on the basis of metre is continued by Söhnen-Thieme 1999.

<sup>25</sup> See Shende 1943, and J. L. Brockington 1998:155: 'the process of transformation seems in the case of both Epics to be linked with passing from the hands of their traditional reciters, the *sūtas* and *kūṣṭlavas*, into those of the *brāhmaṇas* as the guardians of all traditional learning'.

the words of Alles (1989:223), 'a nineteenth-century European bias against the intellectual capabilities of an ancient poet'.

Hiltebeitel is overstating the case here. In the first instance the cue for the analytical approach is given by the text itself, which refers to the existence of three different stages of expansion of the text as it is transmitted from Vyāsa to Vaiśampāyana, from Vaiśampāyana to Ugrasravas, and from Ugrasravas, with addition of material learned from his father about the lineage of the Bhṛgu, to Śaunaka and the assembled sages in the Naimiṣa forest. Thus parcelling out the composition of the text amongst a number of personalities, the text itself may be said to be complicit in the 'bias against the intellectual capabilities of an ancient poet'. Hiltebeitel says (p. 158) that 'the notion that Vyāsa and Vaiśampāyana produced prior recensions of the *Mahābhārata* is a fancy of several scholars', but it is first and foremost a fancy not of scholars but of the text. Hiltebeitel is of course at liberty to disbelieve the text's story of its own origins, but such a policy is at least as 'colonialist' as the one he is criticising. Having said that, he makes the very good points that the names *Bhārata* and *Mahābhārata* are usually used interchangeably by the text, and thus do not refer to different stages of expansion, and that Vyāsa's 24,000-verse *Bhārata* without subtales (mentioned at *Mahābhārata* 1.1:61) may just as well be a digest, subsequent to the full *Mahābhārata*, as an earlier stage of its evolution. It is easy to imagine demand for such a digest. In the final analysis there is very little difference between a *Mahābhārata* which was continuously edited and expanded over a long period, and one that was conceived and created over a much shorter one, drawing on whatever textual traditions then existed. The people creating the *Mahābhārata* in Hiltebeitel's scenario have clearly drawn on existing textual traditions, whose worldviews are still visible and occasionally at odds with each other and / or with the authorial committee. Either process could have produced the text we have, whether this be deemed to be hopelessly disorganised and confused, or magnificent in its structural and thematic unity.

I would suggest that it is possible to combine Hiltebeitel's approach and the analytic approach. Hiltebeitel admits (2001) that the text has more than one author, but he does not fully explore the implications of authoring-by-committee for the finished text. While he correctly points out (p. 164) that 'the composers are not averse to rough joins, repetitions and reiterations, multiple and deepening causalities, overdeterminations, and intriguing contradictions', these features, recognition of which lies behind the idea of a lengthy compositional period, are precisely what one would

expect from multiple authorship no matter what time period separates the authorial layers. Rather than being aspects of the overall design of the text, it seems better to see such irregularities as an unavoidable correlate of multiple authorship, which would proceed by way of successive authors, each with their own expertise and textual aims, editing and adding to the work-in-progress passed amongst them. Hiltebeitel's scenario, therefore, cannot disallow the analytical approach of separating what an author has added from what was received. All he can do is insist, when a scholar claims that section *x* is older than section *y*, that the age difference may be days, weeks, months or years rather than hundreds of years. This is nonetheless a valid and valuable point, and is to be borne in mind whilst reading the rest of this thesis. Where I identify one section of text as later than another, calling it an interpolation, it may not be much later at all, but nonetheless such identification is necessary in order to understand the philosophical development of the text.<sup>26</sup>

Hiltebeitel says in the conclusion of his article (1999:166) that 'one of the chief objects of the *Mahābhārata* is... to instruct kings and other *kṣatriyas* in how to curb endless cycles of violence, particularly as such cycles affect and implicate *brāhmaṇas*'. Here he touches on an issue that is germane to our investigation of the socio-political milieu within which the text was produced. Hiltebeitel's account bids us envisage the period prior to the *Mahābhārata* as featuring the following events: the *brāhmaṇa* *hotṛ* Caṇḍabhārgava narrowly fails to engineer the massacre of the snake people;<sup>27</sup> *brāhmaṇa* Rāma massacres the *kṣatriyas*, a clear violation of *varṇadharmā* (*Mahābhārata* 3.115-117, Goldman 1977:93-112); and the Kauravas' expansionist policy results in a war of unparalleled devastation due to the involvement of several characters whose behaviour violates *varṇadharmā*.<sup>28</sup> The text thus tries to ensure political and social stability through insisting that *varṇadharmā* be maintained. Who stands to gain from this? The editors of the text. As *brāhmaṇas*, they want to preserve the reputation of their *varṇa*, and, as the text bears out, they have developed a strategy for dominance, or at least survival, by non-military means, through the innovation of the

<sup>26</sup> It is notable that Hiltebeitel does not have much to say about philosophy. Were he to, I expect he would have to explain some 'intriguing contradictions' in terms of the authors' different philosophies and uses of philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> Minkowski 1991:397: 'embedding the Epic in an apocalyptic rite that only some survive prefigures the theme of the Epic as a whole: the passing of an age, the eradication of a race, the survival of a few'. See also Kosambi 1964.

<sup>28</sup> See Hiltebeitel 1976:244-286 for an account of the four Kaurava *senāpatīs* in terms of *varṇasaṃkara* / *paradharmā*. See also *Bhagavadgītā* 3:35, Karve 1974:121-137, Johnson 1998: Aśvatthāman, one of the main protagonists of the massacre at night, is, like his father Droṇa, a *brāhmaṇa* who does not behave like one.

*karmayoga*, with which Vedic ritual orthodoxy may be preserved despite the fashion for ritual renunciation (chapter three), through the widening of *brāhmaṇical* involvement in non-Vedic ritual practises (chapter four), and through the exploitation of tribal religious systems to ensure popular validation of their status (chapter six).<sup>29</sup>

The sheer breadth and diversity of the material that the *Mahābhārata* incorporates and / or appropriates suggests that at the time of its compilation, many diverse and traditional cultures were being integrated into a wider polity. This integration is variously referred to as *brāhmaṇisation* (which includes Sanskritisation) and as the orthodox synthesis (J. L. Brockington 1991). According to Kosambi (1962, 1964) this process can be correlated with the development of new agricultural technologies in the area where the Bhārata peoples were settled:

‘the prime historical and social context of the document can only be change (in a comparatively restricted locality between the Punjab and the Ganges) from food-gathering to food-production; the redaction of the Epic merely reflects the change. This adaptation of myths and cults (into amphictyonies worshipping common gods) eventually became a normal process for peaceful assimilation of food-gathering tribal aborigines into a wider, plough-using synoikism with caste and class division’ (Kosambi 1964:36).

We can see the text’s social project as part of a bid for power by certain groups in a new and as-yet-unstable historical situation. The most instructive scholar in this regard is Fitzgerald (1983, 1991). In an article which suggests that the *Mahābhārata* was deliberately presented as the fifth Veda,<sup>30</sup> appealing, in contrast to the other four but in common with Buddhism, to the soteriological hopes even of women and *sūdras*, he says (1991:154) that ‘neither the creation of this text nor the effort to promulgate it could have been casual, and I suspect both were undertaken by some royal house for important symbolic or propagandistic purposes’.<sup>31</sup> In an earlier article (1983), Fitzgerald highlights the text’s loathing for the divisiveness of *kṣatriya* values and the instability and bloodshed that results from them. He argues that the text illustrates the necessity for social transformation from tribal rivalry to a multicultural state. This conclusion is in

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<sup>29</sup> See Sullivan 1990:112: ‘in the *Mahābhārata*, an effort is being made to define the proper role of the *brāhmaṇa* in Hindu society... the Vedic paradigm... was being modified by the addition of other practices to the *brāhmaṇa*’s repertoire, namely *tapas* (including *yoga*) and religious devotion (*bhakti*)’.

<sup>30</sup> The text claims that it exhausts all that is worth knowing, and that mere acoustic exposure to it is soteriologically potent.

<sup>31</sup> The success of the *Mahābhārata*’s power-bid was extraordinary. The *Mahābhārata* as a living tradition remains constitutive of a certain inclusive Indian polity, and the authority of *brāhmaṇas* and the Vedic tradition, both endorsed by the *Mahābhārata*, are enduring cultural forms in almost all parts of India. It is interesting to wonder what other power-bids there may have been at the same time, unsuccessful ones, whose text-bearers were silenced. It is also important to note, in connection with Fitzgerald’s suggestion of ‘some royal house’, that the *Mahābhārata*, rather than legitimising a certain dynasty, legitimises a certain type of society and a certain type of rulership, thus allowing *brāhmaṇical* ideological centralisation to underlie a diversely administered polity.

line with that implied by Hildebeitel's article discussed above, and I believe that it is the single most important development in the history of *Mahābhārata* scholarship. It allows the text to be notched into a more general socio-historical framework, described in detail by Thapar (1984), which can be further illustrated by similar developments in other places. Diamond (1998a:265-292) shows that many developments of the kind that we view in the *Mahābhārata*, such as the appearance of religious (as opposed to ritual) ideology, are direct results of population growth.<sup>32</sup> This ties in well with the technological and agricultural revolution identified by Kosambi.

This thesis, then, will have to explain how the *Bhagavadgītā*'s philosophy of *asakta karman* fitted into the *Mahābhārata*'s overall social project. Any flaws in this philosophy are likely to be due, at least in part, to the process of fitting such a philosophy into such a social project.

#### 2.4. The quest for the 'original' *Bhagavadgītā*

One interpolationist debate which must be avoided is that as to whether the *Bhagavadgītā* is an integral or an adventitious part of the *Mahābhārata*. Having ascertained that the *Mahābhārata* is an edited synthesis drawing on various textual traditions, this judgement then extends by implication to the *Bhagavadgītā* unless it is independently established that the *Bhagavadgītā* is all of a piece. In fact the *Bhagavadgītā*, like the *Mahābhārata*, features a range of literary styles. J. L. Brockington (1998:269) says that there are

'two views that are in practice tenable about the *Bhagavadgītā*: either it is an integral part of the *Mahābhārata* and directed pragmatically to Arjuna's situation, or it is a later insertion (which includes the possibility of a later expansion of a brief original) developing a philosophically and theologically significant message from its *Mahābhārata* context'.

This assessment presents a false dichotomy. These views are compatible and both are indispensable. It is not clear what the phrase 'an integral part of the *Mahābhārata*' can mean here: if '*Mahābhārata*' simply refers to the text we have, and any previous, smaller edition does not merit the name, then all parts of it are integral; if, on the other hand, '*Mahābhārata*' refers to a textual tradition in which a text is growing and developing, then this indeed is a strange use of the word, since there may be any number

<sup>32</sup> At 1.189 the *Mahābhārata* mentions human population expansion as a problem for the *devas*. This expansion is put down to Yama's being busy with a protracted ritual, and by implication it is connected to the reincarnation of the five Indras as the Pāṇḍava brothers and thus to the bloodshed at Kurukṣetra. See Hildebeitel 2001:119-120.

of similarities or differences between the expanding text and the *Mahābhārata* as we have it.

Following the pioneering work of Hopkins (1901) in dissecting the *Mahābhārata* into different layers of accretion, the analytic approach has naturally been applied to the *Bhagavadgītā*, its most famous episode. Otto (1939), Khair (1969), and Jezic (1979, 1986) seem, amongst others,<sup>33</sup> to be gradually making more and more plausible and detailed suggestions about which sections of the *Bhagavadgītā* might have been interpolated, and why. Khair, for example, initially trying to come to terms with inconsistencies of terminology, manages, by compiling and analysing tables of the occurrence of different grammatical, conceptual and ideological forms, to isolate three points of view in the text, and to justify and date them by comparing them with other, non-Epic, textual evidence. Jezic, while recognising that Khair's three-author conclusion is too simplistic, correctly acknowledges (1986:629) that 'Khair's identification of the *bhakti* layer and its role as the synthesising layer is the most important achievement of the textual criticism of the *Bhagavadgītā*'. This tallies well with Deshpande's assessment (1991:347): '...it seems most likely that there was a version of the *Mahābhārata* which did not contain a notion of Kṛṣṇa as a divinity... a reflection of this state of the *Bhagavadgītā* is seen in the *Anugītā*, which purports to summarise the *Bhagavadgītā*, and yet does not contain references to Kṛṣṇa as a divinity'.<sup>34</sup>

The primary indicator which Khair uses to pick out the later verses is Kṛṣṇa's referring to God using the first person. Khair's claim (1969:31) that 'after the exclusion of the first person verses from the first hexad, the section stands out as a complete unit with a logical argument concerning the philosophy of *yoga*' is then extremely interesting, although according to Jezic's subtler philology even this section can be further subdivided. The concentration on the first six chapters is shared by Karve (1974:180): 'Kṛṣṇa's teaching is contained in the first six chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Even in these chapters, about half of it is later addition'.

In view of the sketch that has been given of the *Mahābhārata*'s creation, it seems inappropriate to speak of an 'original *Bhagavadgītā*', as Otto, Khair and others have

<sup>33</sup> See J. L. Brockington 1998:267-271 for the best recent summary of analytical work on the *Bhagavadgītā*.

<sup>34</sup> See Hopkins 1901:397-398: the Epic's growth is here split into five chronological stages, Kṛṣṇa's divinity being placed in the third stage (200 BCE-200 CE).

done, as if there was once a complete and pristine text which became sullied by vandalising editors with ulterior motives. In fact the quest for the ‘original *Bhagavadgītā*’ is probably symptomatic of ulterior motives: the supposition that any particular pre-critical edition of the text was stable for long is quite simply unjustifiable, and the outcome of making it is the imaginative corroboration of a certain scheme of Indian history. It is perfectly reasonable to suggest that the text may have changed through time, but to privilege certain sections of it as ‘original’ is odd: what would be meant by this? That they are older, certainly, but why does this matter? Being older does not make them any more authentic, nor does it make them any more in keeping with the rest of the *Mahābhārata*, much of which must also be considered as interpolation on this view. There may be some desire to unearth a *Bhagavadgītā* which can stand on its own, so to speak, as a self-contained and self-consistent entity. But the *Bhagavadgītā* is part of the *Mahābhārata*: there is no reason for it to stand on its own, despite its later reputation in Hinduism. The macro-text is at liberty to pursue its themes and interests within the micro-text even when these do not seem germane to Arjuna’s situation: furthermore, many who have made this judgement (that much of what Kṛṣṇa says it at odds with Arjuna’s immediate problem) will only be aware of certain aspects of Arjuna’s situation, the whole of which is only given (textually) by the whole of the macro-text.

Mahadevan remarks (1952:104-107) that ‘the enchanting quest for the original *Gītā* owes its inspiration... to the apparently heterogeneous nature of Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s teaching... How can one and the same author be responsible for such incompatible doctrines?’. He delivers a stinging critique of the scholarly peeling-off of supposedly interpolated layers: ‘as to which doctrine was the earlier one and which doctrine or doctrines were interpolated, the critics differ amongst themselves, prompted by their own inclinations... no objective evidence, however, has been offered by the critics to show why they consider certain verses to be interpolated ones... unless clear and unmistakable evidences are forthcoming, there is no justification for regarding any verse of the *Gītā* as an interpolation’. This critique resembles Hildebeitel’s critique, discussed above, of the analytic tradition of *Mahābhārata* scholarship.

The text has been subject to continuous self-interpretation in light of the wider context which surrounded it. This is true, because even if we were to say that ‘the text’ did not exist except by being written by a single person (de Smet 1975), such a person writing such a text cannot be imagined without also imagining a range of pre-existing



textual traditions, some of which we know from other ancient Indian sources, some of which we do not, which he or she may have drawn upon in composing and writing it. The result is an extremely rich and varied text. The ideological variety within the text is, I think, the root of the inability of commentators to agree on its meaning: it is greater than that of most scholars. Accepting this, the text must be approached in the knowledge that the researcher's own ideological bias may obstruct the understanding of some sections of it, and that this is a warning against speculating about the meaning of the text as a whole, for, whatever this may be, it is hard for anyone but the hypothetical *Gītākāra* to understand fully. However, the ideological range of the text also means that, whatever the researcher's ideological bias, good sense will surely be made of some of it.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine, philosophically, the idea of *asakta karman* in the *Bhagavadgītā*. We are therefore immediately set apart from the *Mahābhārata* as a whole; the macro-text is context to the study. This context, which is found as soon as one begins to ask serious questions of the text, may or may not be part of the reason why the *Bhagavadgītā* is such a religiously famous text that one might ask what its supposedly amazing philosophy of action is. In a way, though, to ask about the *Bhagavadgītā* in terms of philosophy of action is already to take into account the philosophies of action illustrated by the characters and events of the macro-text: if a translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* were presented in isolation, one unversed in surviving ancient Indian texts would be slightly nonplussed by the first chapter, but thereafter could fully indulge any theological or religious imagination they might have. But if the macro-text (and, by process of implication, *its* context/s) is taken into account, it gets harder and harder (whatever the synthetists might think, this is the longest known poem) to sustain the image of a single author, and the quest for a meaningful, consistent philosophy of action begins to seem silly.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless this thesis will continue the quest, because there is no other way for me and it to do it. That this is true is not necessarily any of my business: ancient India is some time ago, and all who speak can only make their own sense, and only in terms of what is being given to them, at the time, to speak with. I think, as will be shown in the following chapters, that what is currently being given to me to speak with offers such insights as to be able to derive a bizarre philosophy of action from the text, which, although Kṛṣṇa overstates the case for

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<sup>35</sup> Given the magnitude of the task in hand for the author, one could be forgiving if one small section of the text did not, by its own internal logic as externally imposed by an arbitrary future other, quite add up.

its availability to any human being at all, nonetheless makes perfect sense according to many current branches of knowledge. This philosophy may only emerge through highlighting some of the previously suggested meanings of Sanskrit words (*e.g. bhakti*) at the expense of others, sometimes in what might seem an obtuse manner given the history of interpretations. This selective highlighting occurs in any field with a history. But because the history of interpretations must be put down, at some level, to what is there to be interpreted (in this case certain ancient Indian texts), as well as to who is interpreting, the selection of texts available for interpretation is of primary importance. If we imagine many non-surviving texts, then the acknowledgement that the vagaries of selection are unknown to us, which must be made *a priori* if we are to be honest with ourselves, tends to collapse our confidence in unreflectively following the tradition of interpretations.

Within the parameters of this thesis, based as it is upon a methodology of placing text as an artefact of the past, the identification of different layers of text is a fruitful possibility for advancing understanding of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Deshpande's view quoted above ('that there was a version of the *Mahābhārata* which did not contain a notion of Kṛṣṇa as a divinity') has been particularly useful. It is not just the philological route that leads to this viewpoint: different text layers have been suggested according to philosophical inconsistencies, which, given the situation and the enormity of editing or creating the *Mahābhārata*, may have been the hardest type of inconsistencies to eliminate. As the above discussions have shown, the analytic approach is a dangerous business, for there are so many historical schemes of *Bhagavadgītā* growth imaginable, and often very little of substance to tip the scales in favour of any particular one. Although there remain a variety of ancient Indian texts with which to compare the *Bhagavadgītā*, few of them can be dated. Also, because historical reconstruction is so heavily reliant on a certain kind of textual evidence, the kind that has survived, the importance of what *is* known is liable to be exaggerated: historical reconstruction of a certain period is conditioned at source by the accidents that may have befallen texts due to the agendas of the periods intervening between then and now. According to Heesterman (1957:5), Vedic texts 'enable us to see the world through the eyes of the Vedic Indian himself, for, though mostly the work of ritualists, they represent a reliable cross-section of the trends of religious thought of that time, otherwise they could not have met with so wide a response in the development of Indian thought'. This is naive and teleological optimism: to say that only representative texts survive is a guess, and almost certainly a bad one. That texts are still surviving shows only that they have

survived.<sup>36</sup> A guess of this type is likely to be similarly wrong in the case of non-Vedic texts. The *Mahābhārata* editors would only have represented whatever cross-section of contemporary religious thought served *their* purposes, not ours. Even the thought that some proto-*Bhārata* may have chronicled historical events (the war and its causes)<sup>37</sup> is not immune to my methodology, which sees the production of texts as socio-politically situated within a context of other texts, many of them presumably now lost, with respect to which new texts positioned themselves (Bailey 1999). The existence of a historical chronicle cannot be explained merely by the events chronicled having occurred, for many events occur without ever being chronicled: explanation demands the more realistic addition (or alternative) that someone thought they had something to gain from that chronicle, or something to lose in its absence. There is an increasing tendency to see text in the context of social and ideological activity: feminist literary theory has highlighted the political nature of textual traditions (Belsey 1985, Spender 1989, Spivak 1985), as have studies of the ideological power available to printers in the wake of technological breakthroughs (Saenger and van Kampen 1999, McQuiston 1997:134-135), together with studies of the effects of certain types of literacy (e.g. English literacy in colonial India, Basu 1978). In light of the insights of these approaches, it is possible to counter some of the force of Mahadevan's critique of the analytic tradition. Although we may argue forever about what constitutes 'objective', 'clear and unmistakable' evidence, there is now a reluctance amongst scholars to precisely identify textual strata unless it is perceived as absolutely necessary for the task in hand, and therefore there is a greater likelihood that suggestions of interpolation that *are* made are not just made because of personal bias.

If the existing texts from the ancient world are not representative, this can help to explain the variety of odd things that have been claimed to have been the case with ancient humans. There are vast lacunae in our knowledge of distant times; the gaps must either be accepted and constantly recognised, which is difficult, or filled out by the imagination, with the concomitant danger that a mixture of current ideologies is forcing the interpretation. Unfortunately those accounts which come closest to achieving the difficult acceptance of the gaps tend to be rather unsatisfactory: it is better to read any story than no story at all. The biggest problem with ancient historical anthropology at

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<sup>36</sup> Questions have been raised about the sense of 'fittest' in the phrase 'survival of the fittest': no non-tautological sense can be made without an appeal to teleology.

<sup>37</sup> Those who view the war as a historical event have spent more time arguing about its date than defending their methodology. See Trivedi 1941, Roy 1976, Agarwala 1979, Aiyer 1987.

the current time is that the territory is littered with hundreds of carefully imagined utopias.<sup>38</sup> The stakes are high, and those playing the game do not all observe the same laws.

### 2.5. Mythological interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*.

The *Mahābhārata* introduces a lofty level of understanding of the story of the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas by introducing the main characters as partial incarnations of various gods (Kantawala 1990), and by presenting their earthly activities as merely the visible aspects of a cosmic competition in which the *devas* eventually defeat the *asuras*.<sup>39</sup> This cosmic competition is only the most important of many celestial events which the text adduces as explanation for the behaviours of its human (or semi-human) characters.<sup>40</sup> Although such a textual strategy is very much of interest to any study of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, this study is of the *Bhagavadgītā*, within which these mythical framings are not mentioned. Arjuna's existential situation just before the great battle stands apart from the text's mythic self-deconstruction, and so does Kṛṣṇa's response to it. Although it would be perfectly easy for Kṛṣṇa to explain the necessity of Arjuna's fighting in terms of the *deva / asura* conflict, he does not do so: his speech is *ad hominem*, and adheres quite closely to the stated and presumed interests of Arjuna himself. The reader or hearer of the *Mahābhārata* may well be led, by way of the text's mythic frame, to interpret the central events of the narrative, and the experiences and sufferings of the characters who play them out, in terms of tragedy: the characters are compelled, by forces beyond their understanding (often involving connections with past lives, or by reproduction of patterns in parents' lives), to behave in the ways they do, and this is in many ways the primary philosophy of the *Mahābhārata* as of many other Epics (J. D. Smith 1989). But as far as Arjuna is concerned, this specific mythic frame is unknown, and the fact that he will inevitably fight despite himself (18:59-61) is presented by Kṛṣṇa as an absolute. In the *Bhagavadgītā* the explanation for Arjuna's behaviour is given not by some mythical meta-story, but by the fact that inevitability-despite-oneself

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<sup>38</sup> The word is here used in its literal sense, to mean 'no place' rather than 'the best imaginable place'.

<sup>39</sup> *Mahābhārata* 1.58. See van Buitenen 1973:xix-xxi. Van Buitenen is critical of the literary effects of this embedded layer of interpretation: 'once such inept mythification is introduced, persons and events intended thus to be made more significant become less so' (p. xx).

<sup>40</sup> Van Buitenen 1973:xxi: 'Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa (the 'White' and the 'Black') are meaningfully said to be the ancient hero pair of Nara and Nārāyaṇa, who, it would appear, are old champions of a rhapsodic tradition drawn into the *Mahābhārata*'.

simply is the case with creatures: Kṛṣṇa Almighty, through *svabhāva*, is the definitive determinative cause of all action. In this way the *Bhagavadgītā* can be seen as far more fatalistic than the *Mahābhārata*: the mythical frame which the macro-text provides might seem to suggest that the human characters described in its narrative are the only ones who are to be seen as compelled by celestial forces. The *kālavāda* determinism, which Vassilkov (1999) identifies as a very old ingredient of the *Mahābhārata*'s textual tradition, is developed in two ways by the *Mahābhārata*: it is turned into tragedy by concentrating on specific events and explaining them in terms of a mythical meta-story, and it is anthropomorphised by the identification of Kṛṣṇa as *kāla* (11:32a).<sup>41</sup> Both of these developments have been seen as relatively late.<sup>42</sup> Further, philosophical problems can be raised with regard to both of them. In the first case, the events of the mythical meta-story are strangely exempt from the kind of deconstruction they perform upon the events of the central narrative. In the second case, the acceptance of the *kālavāda* in the anthropomorphic form of Kṛṣṇa goes hand in hand with the possibility of paying homage to him, accepting the *kālavāda*, and thus effecting *sukha* and *mokṣa*: the *Bhagavadgītā* repeatedly urges Arjuna, and by extension all human beings, to fulfil their *svabhāva* and, further, to become *bhaktas* of Kṛṣṇa, but according to that same *kālavāda* this second thing is not within their power to purposefully do or not do,<sup>43</sup> as it can be imagined to conflict with *svabhāva* in many cases (see below, chapter five).

Mythological interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* can go far beyond the text's own commentary on the events it portrays. Within scholarly discourse, comparison with other Indo-European mythologies has led to a tendency to view the text as presenting an Indian instantiation of common mythological concerns. While the eschatological thrust of the *deva / asura* frame story, that is, the idea that through the war the earth is liberated from oppression,<sup>44</sup> is clearly visible in the *Mahābhārata* and alluded to by the *Bhagavadgītā* (11:26-34), some of the Indo-European symbolisms that have been traced in the text are not part of the text's self-understanding. For example, an Indo-European

<sup>41</sup> At 11:33c Kṛṣṇa says that Arjuna's opponents have been previously killed (*nihatāḥ pūrvam*) by Kṛṣṇa, but Vassilkov 1999:23 observes that 'outside the *Gītā* the motif of the 'previously killed' occurs only in connection with *kāla*'.

<sup>42</sup> Van Buitenen sees the mythical context as a later transformation of an existing narrative. J. L. Brockington 1998:137 regards the chapter on the partial incarnations (1.61) as 'relatively late'. Vassilkov 1995, however, sees the divine origin of heroes as a characteristic of archaic Epic. On the lateness of Kṛṣṇa's divinity, see above, 2.4.

<sup>43</sup> If it is possible to be a Kṛṣṇa-*bhakta* unknowingly, then perhaps all folk are always Kṛṣṇa-*bhaktas*.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson 1998:xxx: 'according to Georges Dumézil... the Epic crisis is essentially the transposition of an Indo-European eschatological myth to do with the events that accompany a threatened end of the world, or at least the end of a world age, followed by a rebirth, or the beginning of the next age'.

social ideology of the three functions, 'administration of the sacred, physical force, and abundance and fecundity' (Dumézil 1970:ix), is apparently a template for the Pāṇḍava family, Yudhiṣṭhira representing the first, Bhīma and Arjuna the second, and Nakula, Sahadeva and Draupadī the third function, though the text is unaware of this.

Comparative study of mythologies has much to offer to our understanding of the *Mahābhārata* as a whole, but, by seeing Epic as a conduit for structures and forms which overarch many geographically and chronologically separate cultures, it may tend to overlook the historically situated nature of much of the Epic's contents. In studying the critical edition of the text, we are studying a particular text, not a textual tradition: this particular text bears witness to certain political realities as well as containing locally available contemporary knowledge in science, cosmology, philosophy, soteriology and other matters. This thesis focuses on Arjuna's narrative situation and the text's extended response to it, informed as this is by those contemporary knowledges. As far as *asakta karman* is concerned, the Indo-European heritage of the *Mahābhārata*'s textual tradition and the results of comparative mythological research are of note principally insofar as they give a background for the *Bhagavadgītā*'s fatalism / determinism. Vassilkov, having linked Indian Epic *kālavāda* with themes in Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek, Iranian, Egyptian, Babylonian and Biblical texts, goes on to say (1999:27) that

'all these texts express the feeling of acute pessimism characteristic of the time that was marked by the disintegration of the harmonious mythological worldview, the consciousness of the tragic side of life and by the lack of any hope to find a way out of the desperate *situation humaine*, for the epoch was merely the first stage or a prelude to the so-called *Achsenzeit*, and the ways to salvation to be later discovered by the soteriological religions were as yet unknown'.

It may well be that this 'acute pessimism' was brought on by the breakdown of tribal integrity due to population expansion, and that soteriological religions have offered the most historically persistent antidote to it. Whatever the case, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s methodology of action presents *kālavāda* in a radically reoriented, situation-specific form: the theoretical mechanics of activity are explained in the proto-scientific and philosophical terminology of the *Sāṃkhya* tradition, and the predetermined nature of all events is given a positive evaluation by the recognition of Kṛṣṇa as the origin of all and by the possibility of salvation through knowledge of him.

Interpretations of the text on the basis of its macro-compositional structure must also be categorised here as mythological interpretations. Whilst some ancient texts have yielded easily to structural analysis on the basis of thematic or syllabic parallelism, alternation or modelling (Douglas 1993, Schwartz 1998, Yates 1992), and whilst some *Bhagavadgītā* scholars have used analytical schemes which take the chapter divisions

and exact presentation of the text very seriously (Prem 1951, C. Chapple's introduction to Sargeant 1984, de Nicolás 1976a), I cannot find any textual patterns which would obviously inform an analysis of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy, apart from the suggestion given, through the number eighteen being the number of chapters in the *Bhagavadgītā* as well as the number of books in the *Mahābhārata*, that the *Bhagavadgītā* is the central scene and Kṛṣṇa's philosophy the central message of the whole *Mahābhārata*.

## 2.6. Modern philosophy and modern science

We have already discussed some problems arising when the *Bhagavadgītā* is studied from the perspective of European theology. The situation is not much different with European philosophy: again, the text is distorted into a foreign conceptual straitjacket which will judge it according to how well it fits. The preoccupations of European philosophy have been determined by the cultural and political success of the Graeco-Roman civilisations, particularly as such success was facilitated by monotheistic religious ideology. In India, perhaps because slavery was not so prevalent, the idea of freedom did not become the existential, social and political talisman that it is in Europe and America. The judgement which responsibility anticipates (to feel responsible is to sit in judgement upon oneself, but this can only be grounded by appealing to an external judgement, for example that of God) is final in the Abrahamic traditions: in India, with reincarnation, judgement only lasts a lifetime, and the salvation game is played over a very long timespan. This enables Indian thinking to approach the idea of the freedom of the will in a more nuanced manner.

There is much overlap between the subjects treated in modern philosophy and in the *Bhagavadgītā*. As far as the philosophy of action is concerned, there is a longstanding discourse on freedom of the will, determinism, and the nature of action (Dennett 1984, McFee 2000, Danto 1973, A. R. White 1970), informed in recent years by neurophysiological discoveries. However, since the deterministic worldview of Newtonian mechanics<sup>45</sup> was supplemented by a non-ontological, probabilistic treatment of quantum mechanical systems, interrogation of the philosophical respectability of the

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<sup>45</sup> Laplace 1952:4: 'Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it –an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis– it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes'.

freedom of the will has been rare. This is unfortunate, as it results in philosophers appropriating and reifying the common-sense notions of freedom and choice, which are very much bound up with the judgemental ideology of the social, legal (see below, 5.2), political and religious establishment. Such appropriation is philosophically decadent, for now freedom and choice may be said to constitute the primary European metaphysic, no matter how incongruously they sit alongside recent scientific understandings of creaturely behaviour. This situation is contingent insofar as it depends on the current state of neurophysiological knowledge, but necessary insofar as we suffer an enforced agnosticism of quantum systems, which constitutes a permanent impediment to our understanding what is involved in making and acting out decisions. Given the extent of social investment in the idea of free will, it was perhaps inevitable, once this impediment to understanding was discovered, that scientists would take the opportunity to transform agnosticism into instrumentalism and move away from the ontological realism which had grounded the disturbing Newtonian determinism.

Despite the apparent opposition of free will and determinism, and the history of their mutual antipathy, philosophers have claimed that they are compatible: Mackay (1967:38) says that 'it is not people, but brains, that may, or may not, be machines: it is not brains, but people, that choose'. Ayer (1963:235-268) makes the same point by differentiating between causes (for brains and other objects) and reasons (for people). Freedom and determinism both function as descriptions, convenient from certain points of view, of what happens when a wave-packet of possibilities, conceptualised in retrospect as probabilities, collapses into a single event. If we ask which of the two descriptions is the closer match of what is actually happening, we might be told that 'what is actually happening' is an occult entity, out of the reach of human access and description, and so the idea of descriptions matching it is absurd: all that can be known is which descriptions are useful for what kinds of purposes. In this sense, a human individual can be seen as a quantum state: although social, environmental and genetic forces may lead us to expect, on the basis of inductive statistical laws, certain types of behaviour from a person described and categorised in certain ways (*e.g.* we can know, by recording what happens, that  $x$  percent of persons who are categorised as  $p$  will end up doing something like  $q$ ), nonetheless no individual can be constrained by the law of averages, only described in terms of it, and the actual reasons for behaviour are inaccessible even to the individual concerned, who, although in a sense the owner of the experience of acting, can only give accounts of it, to themselves or anyone else, by using the ideas in contemporary discourse. In the face of the inaccessibility of decision



and action, European philosophy of action has continued to exploit the utility of certain types of description, using inductive statistical laws to great effect in governmental and institutional planning, and using the idea of individual free will to great effect within its moral, legal, economic and religious structures. This exploitation has occurred without the acknowledgement that any view of the mechanism whereby a person does this rather than that, the supposed kernel of the discourse, has been lost.

Notwithstanding this general critique of European philosophy of action, there are still unfashionable voices (e.g. Honderich 1993) prepared to weather the accusations of the 'moral majority' and take determinism seriously in the light of modern science. It appears that when this is done from a philosophical viewpoint, rather than one of popular science or rhetorical morality, determinism can be made the basis of an attitude of beatific and active acceptance of one's lot, similar in tone to that described in the *Bhagavadgītā*. This may, however, just be a question of emphasis: elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* the knowledge that everything is destined fosters feelings of gloomy resignation and impotence. This matter will be discussed further in chapter five below.

Recent sociobiological writings, following Dawkins (1976), have moved towards a genetic way of understanding animal and human action and its causes. This approach takes a Darwinian perspective and sees species as evolving successful genetic continuities. The individual is deconstructed from such a perspective: tendencies, instincts, impulses and predispositions can be understood as reactions to new circumstances according to the rules and parameters given by a precise genetic makeup whose positive selection the individual is proof of. Insofar as the gene chain continues and the species survives, this is because the new circumstances which each successive generation comes into contact with change, on the whole, slowly enough to be in some way tracked by genetic makeup, which itself changes according to permutations through sexual mixing and 'random' mutation. Since the behaviour of the individual body is constrained by the genes which coded for the proteins which build it, and since these genes are precisely those which have led to bodies which successfully reproduce, there are questions concerning how the individual brain's conscious cogitations and mental habits might relate to the behaviour of its body. The long timescale of the genetic context is radically at odds with the lifespan of an individual body: conscious cogitations could therefore be theorised as no more than a synaptic by-product, useful for linguistic and social purposes, of the mechanism by which the individual serves its genes. There is an inevitable mismatch between the account that an isolated individual

might give of its behaviour, and that which we might give from a genetic determinist perspective if we could identify and historically track the genes making up the individual.

This deconstruction of the individual, into a wider constitutive context within which alone its mentality may be properly grounded, is similar to that performed by the *Bhagavadgītā*. Though it does not pursue an explicitly genetic-evolutionary framework, the text is highly aware of genetic continuity: ancient Indian texts show a preoccupation with sustaining the ancestors in yonder world through ritual activity in this world, and with having male offspring who can then ensure future sustenance. Also, the idea that the tendencies, instincts, impulses and predispositions of the individual are explainable only in terms of a long and naturally obscure history of similar individuals, of whom the current individual is the presently manifest token, bears similarities to the idea of *karmic* continuity linking long chains of lives. *Karmic* continuity is not linked to generational tribal continuity.<sup>46</sup> In some ways this is a weakness in the idea: since it cannot then be crystallised in sperm and egg, *karmic* continuity evokes notions of a mysterious subtle body which must transport pure but precise potentialities unseen from place to place. On the other hand, the ensuing openness in one's future and past incarnation means that the imagination of extravagantly good or bad rebirth or prebirth can play an extremely useful part in the construction of enduring social ethics. In the *Bhagavadgītā* the deconstruction of the individual is effected diachronically by the idea of *dehin* repeatedly taking on bodies. But the individual is also deconstructed synchronically, its behaviour explainable in human terms as *svadharma* in an orderly functioning cosmos, and in more technical terms as the operation of the *guṇas* through the senses and the various mental faculties of the *prakṛtic* body. The use of *prakṛti* as the ultimate ontological origin of all events and activities, the only true agent, is characteristic of the text's deconstruction of action.<sup>47</sup> The modern biological deconstruction must similarly raise question as to the true agent of activity: in some ways, genes are acting by means of individuals, but the ontological status of genes is problematical,<sup>48</sup> and in other ways

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<sup>46</sup> Hence the diverse origins of *svabhāva*: on the one hand *svabhāva* is determined by *varṇa*, that is, genetically, but on the other hand it is determined by *karman* from previous lives in other *varṇas*, species and *lokas*.

<sup>47</sup> The technical deconstruction of the individual into the bodily and mental faculties is in many ways similar to Buddhist analysis of the 'self' into the five *skandhas*: see Hamilton 1996, S. Collins 1982, Conze 1962:107-116. Buddhism, however, had no use for the concept of *prakṛti*: it dodged the issue of ontology and persisted with a phenomenological, practical and positivistic approach.

<sup>48</sup> A gene is an information complex. But what is the current status of genomes whose species became extinct thousands of years ago, but which may or may not be discovered and decoded and even re-bodied by future scientists?

the presence of the precise situation in which the action takes place is the agent of a specific action, that situation acting by means of the potencies and creatures attendant within itself. Science does not in general concern itself with such philosophical or ontological concerns. Nonetheless it runs into problems when using the concept of agency in impersonal contexts: it is all too easy for genetic determinists to anthropomorphise genes or genetic continuities, just as it is for the *Bhagavadgītā* to anthropomorphise *prakṛti* as an aspect of Kṛṣṇa. Since we are accustomed to thinking of our activities as teleologically connected to our individual cognitive processes, it is hard to re-frame them except through teleologically focusing on some wider agent. Modern biological thinking can therefore be closely allied with the philosophical moves made by the *Bhagavadgītā*, and will be introduced and discussed in more detail in the following chapters as they study those moves in detail.

The question of teleology presents a similar problem in science as in (theological) philosophy:

'Anatomical structures and instincts that promote survival and reproductive success tend to become established (genetically programmed) by natural selection. But the need to make wordy statements such as these arises very often in any discussion of evolutionary biology. Hence biologists routinely resort to anthropomorphic language to condense such statements—for example, they say that an animal [species] 'chooses' to do something or pursues a certain strategy. This shorthand vocabulary should not be misconstrued as implying that animals [*i.e.* animal species, genetic continuities] make conscious calculations' (Diamond 1998b:24-25).

Drees (1994:214) notes that 'biological evolution should be explained without reference to an overall purpose, even though individual organisms do have purposes, if described at a level which allows for such a concept'. The misunderstanding has been fuelled by the title of *The selfish gene* (Dawkins 1976): when we move beyond the narrow understanding of actions as determined by a person's mental state while acting, we must abjure all teleological explanation. Teleology is a feature (and, Kṛṣṇa would say, an illusion) only of the conventions of description of such mental states: outside this sphere, causality has to be presented some other way. This is extremely difficult, though, because human activities and their associated mental states are the main focus of our ordinary attentions. It is difficult, for example, to conceive of the causal link between environmental degradation and environmental disaster without invoking the idea of nature taking revenge upon us: our ideas of what constitutes 'degradation' and 'disaster' are in any case anthropocentric, or at the very least biocentric.

Cosmology and cosmogony are major concerns of modern physics as they are of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Comparisons between pre-'big bang' singularities as envisaged by

Hawking (1988: see also Penrose 1989, Barrow 1994:37-53) and the night of *brahman*<sup>49</sup> of 8:17-19 are not particularly edifying,<sup>50</sup> but the idea of a multitude of inherently separated universes is nonetheless a point in common, as imagined in many ways by modern physicists: as many universes each traceable to a Hawking-Penrose singularity; as many sub-universes within an inflationary macro-universe (Guth 1997); or as the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics (see below). Another point in common is the similarity between the gradual but inexorable increase in entropy (disorder) within a persisting universe, envisaged according to the third law of thermodynamics, and the gradual decrease of *dharmā* as the universe passes through the four *yugas*. Although this *dharmic* decrease by *yuga* is not explicitly expounded in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and although the four-*yuga* cycle occurs a multitude of times in a day of *brahman*,<sup>51</sup> the idea of in-built decay has modern resonance.

Debate over the interpretation of quantum mechanics is particularly relevant to the subject of this thesis.<sup>52</sup> Quantum mechanics has led to the decline of the mechanistic view of a closed, causally coherent, 'clockwork' universe, which was suggested by Newtonian mechanics. The remainder of this chapter will argue that such a decline is unwarranted. A brief resumé of the problems of quantum mechanics will be followed by comments relating the issues raised to the current study. The resulting ontological realism is a methodological assumption for the *Bhagavadgītā* as well as for this thesis.

Earlier this century it was found that, when we try to study very small systems, such as a single electron travelling through space, there are limits on the extent to which we can obtain a detailed picture of what is going on. At this microscopic level, parameters such as velocity, acceleration and position, which were assumed to be properties of objects waiting, as it were, to be ascertained, cannot be simultaneously known. This seems to be because our interrogation of the system disrupts it: the act of measurement causes a change in what is there to be measured, and thus there is a critical limit to the accuracy of simultaneous measurements of position and momentum. This

<sup>49</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā* does not here stipulate whether *brahman* is masculine or neuter. Translators have tended to opt uncritically for *Brahmā*, in conformity with the unambiguous but androcentric *Manusmṛti*.

<sup>50</sup> The chronological succession of universes in the Indian model is mocked by Einsteinian relativism whereby time outside the universe is a nonsense. Hawking 1988 uses this to disallow the question of what happened or existed 'before the universe began'.

<sup>51</sup> *Mahābhārata* 3.186:17-23 describes one day of *brahman* as 1000 four-*yuga* cycles. *Manusmṛti* 1:71-72 agrees with this scheme, though Dutt's translation obscures this.

<sup>52</sup> This debate is summarised in many publications. See for example Polkinghorne 1984.

limit is quantified as Planck's constant, and is expressed by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The limit to the accuracy of determinate measurement does not mean that we cannot know or predict the behaviour of quantum systems, but it does mean that such knowledge and prediction can only be made by averaging out the tendencies of these systems and describing them by means of statistical laws. Thus, for example, we cannot know when a certain radioactive isotope is going to decay and emit a quantum of radiation, or what physical laws might govern the precise timing of such an emission, but instead we can say that, for a particular isotope, it will take, on average, a certain length of time (the half-life of the isotope) for half of the atoms in the sample to emit radiation. Such statistical methods are also used in other fields: although it may be impossible to determine in advance whether or not a certain person will vote Conservative, it is nonetheless possible to predict upper and lower limits for the expected overall Conservative vote.<sup>53</sup>

The debate concerns the interpretation of the limits set upon human measurement. What can we say about the unmeasurable aspects of the system? Does it make sense to continue to think of a single electron as possessing determinate values of both position and momentum even though such values cannot be simultaneously known? Or does Heisenberg's uncertainty principle indicate that our conventional causal notions of physics are simply inapplicable to the quantum world? Three main points of view have emerged in response to these questions. The one most widely held by physicists is known as the Copenhagen interpretation and was championed by Bohr. On this view, we must accept a fundamental agnosticism with regard to what might lie behind observable quantum phenomena: having reached the limits of usefulness of our concepts, we must abandon them and attempt no further descriptions.<sup>54</sup> Statistical laws take into account the limited usefulness of concepts: when we ask 'what is the probability, if I ask this electron what its momentum is, that I will go away with the value  $m$ ?', we do not imply that the electron has a momentum, we are just saying that if we ask it a certain question we are likely to get a certain type of answer. In this way statistical laws imply no ontological commitment, and the Copenhagen interpretation is

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<sup>53</sup> Einstein thought that, since quantum mechanics stops at statistical laws, it constitutes an incomplete view of the world. Zukav 1979:93: 'Einstein's complaint was that quantum theory doesn't fully explain things because it deals with group behaviour and not with individual events'.

<sup>54</sup> There is a gap here for the entry of 'non-scientific' causes at the quantum level: Polkinghorne 1986:71-72 discusses and dismisses the claims that God or 'us' are causes of 'uncaused' quantum events.

an instrumentalist one, concerned only with saving appearances.<sup>55</sup>

Bohm has objected to this anti-realist stance which he sees as contrary to the general assumptions of scientific practice (Bohm and Hiley 1995).<sup>56</sup> He has insisted that the behaviours we observe, such as the apparently random individual emissions of a radioactive isotope, must be governed by a set of causal laws whose operation we cannot inspect. Such a move is in line with the strategy we would adopt in most other fields. This so-called 'hidden variables' interpretation is necessarily limited in its scope, since no apparatus has been devised which could ever disclose the hidden variables to us, and it consists largely in a critique of the Copenhagen interpretation. Norris (2000:25-26) has summarised this critique well, and, since the point is so important, he will be quoted at length:

'...it is precisely the problem with orthodox quantum mechanics –a problem (that is) for all but its hard-line advocates– that it deprives such terms [as 'explain', 'understand', 'comprehend', and 'reality'] of any real explanatory content. On this view, we have everything required of an adequate theory or interpretation when we apply the standard quantum formalisms, obtain a probability value as yielded by the Schrödinger equation, and then go on to compare the results with those achieved through empirical observation or measurement. But in that case, so its critics maintain, the word 'interpretation' is itself being redefined in quantum-instrumentalist terms, *i.e.* as involving no claim to understand what is really going on beyond the requirements of statistical warrant, empirical adequacy, or predictive confirmation. This is surely hard to square with the... evidence of its great –indeed unequalled– success as a physical theory that has managed not only to 'explain' such a range of classically unexplained phenomena but also to inspire the development of technologies undreamt of before the advent of quantum mechanics. At the very least there is a problem in upholding the standard Copenhagen line on this issue while proclaiming –as orthodox theorists frequently do– the extent to which quantum mechanics has been instrumental in bringing those advances about. For such claims are 'instrumentalist' in a sense wholly opposed to the usual, somewhat specialised philosophy-of-science usage of the term. That is to say, they involve a strong supposition that any theory (or interpretation thereof) that yields scientific or technological progress will do so by providing a better, more adequate grasp of the real-world operative features –microstructural attributes, causal dispositions, law-governed regularities, *etc.*– which make such progress possible. In which case clearly there is something awry about a theory (orthodox quantum mechanics) that erects the non-availability of any such realist or causal-explanatory account into a high point of a *a priori* doctrine'.

A third interpretation, the 'many worlds' interpretation (Everett 1957, D. Deutsch 1997, Norris 2000:106-164), shares Bohm's instinct to maintain an ontology of the unseen, but, since the unseen could, as far as we know, take many different possible forms, grants reality to all of them. Thus, when an uninterrogated quantum system is

<sup>55</sup> Norris 2000:9: 'Bohr's philosophy of science can be seen as a mixture of Kantian and pragmatist themes, one that confines knowledge to the realm of phenomenal appearances while quantum 'reality' is taken as belonging to a noumenal realm that lies beyond the reach of any concepts we can frame concerning it, and which thereby justifies the pragmatist equation of truth with what effectively counts as such for all practical (predictive-observational) purposes'.

<sup>56</sup> See also Bell, quoted in Bernstein 1991:84: 'for me, it is so reasonable to assume that the photons in those experiments carry with them programs... telling them how to behave. This is so rational that I think, when Einstein saw that and the others refused to see it, *he* was the rational man. The other people, though history has justified them, were burying their heads in the sand. I feel that Einstein's intellectual superiority over Bohr, in this instance, was enormous, a vast gulf between the man who saw clearly what was needed, and the obscurantist'.

described by a wave-function of probabilities of different states, every state that is assigned a non-zero probability is deemed to be the case in reality, even though, after interrogation, only one such state is found to be the case in *this* reality. This interpretation leads to the assumption of a very large number of universes, some differing from each other only slightly. Everything that we imagine we will do but then don't do, and everything we wish we had done but didn't, exists. Rescher (1979) explores 'the ontology of the possible', supposing (p. 168) that 'unactualised possibilities... can, in a way, exist –or 'subsist' if one prefers– ...as the objects of certain intellectual processes'. But these are clearly not objects in the way that sticks and stones are: they are, as Rescher points out, mind-dependent, and so, 'if the conceptual resources that come into being with rational minds and their capabilities were abolished, the realm of supposition and counterfact would be abolished too, and with it the domain of unrealised, albeit possible, things would also have to vanish' (p. 172). Rescher justifies his designating possible things as 'objects' by saying that, though they are mind-dependent, they are independent of specific minds. Such 'objects' have been called memes (Dawkins 1976, Blackmore 1999). The 'many worlds' interpretation of quantum mechanics is hampered by the apparent mind-dependency of its extra worlds, which would make them nothing to do with physics, and which, if denied, making them unabolishable, lends a Platonic air to proceedings. It is a curious interpretation: if it seems far fetched, and in conflict with Occam's razor, this may be seen to indicate the difficulty of the problem.

Our reason for surveying this field concerns the nature of causality. The *Bhagavadgītā* depicts *prakṛti* as a closed causal scheme which operates by means of the *guṇas* to exactly determine every event in detail. It does this irrespective of the fact that no human being can fully penetrate the complexities of the causal networks in question. There can be no question that the workings of *prakṛti* are causal: *prakṛti* includes *karmic* continuity and works by the movements of the *guṇas* with respect to each other (3:28c). The *guṇas*, whose activity is denoted by the verb root *vṛt*, represent an attempt to conceive of the abstract operations of *prakṛti* in causal terms: it is the *guṇas* which bind the *dehin* in the body (14:5cd). On a more specific level, impulses to action are caused by the operation of emotions caused by interactions between the senses and their objects (5:9cd).

Whilst the minute interactions between the *guṇas* and between the senses and their objects are not open to human investigation, the whole of the text's philosophy of

action rests upon the assumption that such interactions nonetheless condition behaviour in exactly the same way as investigable ones would. It is precisely because most such conditioning interactions are not investigable, that the causal completeness of *prakṛti*, which could never be experimentally ascertained, is asserted. However, if the text were to countenance an approach like that of the Copenhagen interpretation, then no such assertion would be warranted, and the fact that we cannot in principle investigate interactions would lead to the suggestion that we cannot even assert that there are interactions. Thus the *Bhagavadgītā* embraces a view comparable to Bohm's 'hidden variable' interpretation: events whose causes we cannot know are not thereby uncaused; Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is anthropocentric, placing limits on epistemology but not on ontology. In fact, in the *Bhagavadgītā* it is precisely the point to recognise the limits of epistemology and to base one's worldview upon an ontology which can only be known in broad outline. The text's recipe for the eradication of *duḥkha* consists of the acknowledgement that human epistemology is extremely limited, but that such limiting is arbitrary and should not be made the basis for ontological conclusions. One ontological conclusion which the text strongly rejects is that of the abiding, acting self. The text makes it very clear that such a conclusion is based on a normal human epistemological limit: *ahaṁkāra* can lead to this false conclusion simply because all kinds of things are true of the universe but not humanly investigable. Ontology is linked to epistemology by nothing but the desire for empirical verification. If this desire is taken too seriously, then ontologies cannot be proposed except where they track epistemology, and we get, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, the abiding, acting self, which does not exist but which can easily be extrapolated on the basis of experience, and, in the Copenhagen interpretation, the refusal to hypothesise any scenario which could possibly explain experience.

The philosophical fallacy of the Copenhagen interpretation has been aided by other developments in modern physics. Chaos theory and complexity theory (Gleick 1988) have extended the domain of the unknowable beyond quantum systems, by drawing attention to systems which contain such a complex array of causal components that the eventual outcome can be radically altered by a minute change in any number of initial parameters. The standard example of this is the 'butterfly effect', in which a butterfly flapping its wings is a determining cause of a subsequent hurricane on the other side of the world: that is to say, if the butterfly had not flapped its wings, all other things being equal, the hurricane would not have happened. This example illustrates how finely tuned many systems are, to the extent that such systems have been called



chaotic, meaning that, even if all initial conditions are known with a maximum of experimental accuracy,<sup>57</sup> the outcome cannot be predicted.

Practical unpredictability is a fact of human life, since we are ordinarily in the position of not knowing precise initial conditions. But if, as the Copenhagen interpretation suggests, initial conditions simply are not precise, irrespective of the contingencies of human attempts to measure them, then this means that, in an extremely complex system such as the universe, any macroscopic event may be traced to any number of uninvestigable quantum uncertainties. If causality is in question at the quantum level, there can be no exhaustive causal explanation of any event whatsoever. This conclusion is clearly at odds with the *prakṛtic* determinism of the *Bhagavadgītā*: indeed, it is at odds with any kind of determinism. But again, the problem is caused by conflating epistemology and ontology. Complexity presents severe limits on the prediction of outcomes by human beings, but that is all. If we imagine a closed Bohm universe with hidden variables following causal laws, then, despite complexity, and despite the fact that much of what goes on will be unknowable to humans, the universe is nonetheless algorithmic: the positions and movements of all its particles at any moment will be exhaustively contained in their past positions and movements, and will exhaustively contain their future positions and movements. That such a precise algorithm is not accessible to human beings is the only reason why an alternative approach is made using probabilities. The use of statistical probabilities is an outcome of the limitations of human knowledge: it has nothing to do with an indeterministic universe.

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<sup>57</sup> The accuracy of measurements will always be finite.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *asakta karman*, action without attachment, is said to ensure that one acts without being bound by action. The bond of action (*karmabandha*) is a notion common to most ancient Indian thought. In terms of the predominant Indian soteriology, *karmabandha* is a residue of action whose consequence, if outstanding at the time of death, is a rebirth by which and in which that leftover *karmabandha* may be exhausted. In this rebirth, however, old *karmabandha* may fail to be exhausted, and new *karmabandha* may be accrued which will tend to cause a further rebirth, and so on. At some stage, if no *karmabandha* is outstanding at death, no rebirth will follow. This eventuality is variously named in different traditions: it is *nirvāṇa* or *parinirvāṇa* in Buddhism, *kaivalya* in Jainism, *mokṣa* in Hinduism. I shall use *mokṣa* as a generic term for this eventuality, since the soteriology is broadly the same in each case.

Jainism is acknowledged to predate, at least in some form, Buddhism and Hinduism. Kṛṣṇa's conviction, shared by the Buddha, that action may be engaged in without the accumulation of *karmabandha*, seems to have been an innovation. Before this innovation, the safest way to ensure *mokṣa* was to remain immobile. Nonetheless, despite this innovation, the soteriological framework of the effects of *karmabandha* remains similar in all three Indian religious traditions.

This chapter describes in detail the problem, or problems, which ancient hearers of the text would think Arjuna to be faced with if he kills his relatives and *gurus*. This problem, or these problems, are to be averted, according to Kṛṣṇa, by the performance of *asakta karman*, and must therefore be thoroughly understood in order to situate our main topic. The first section of the chapter explores the Indian soteriology of repeated rebirths ending in *mokṣa* from *saṃsāra*, in which context the result of Arjuna's deed would be to severely delay 'his' arrival at this end. An attempt is made to expound this soteriology as fully as possible, but, in doing so, many impenetrable philosophical problems are encountered, and the discussion is forced to try to account for them. I show that one of the main building blocks of the soteriology is the philosophy of *dehin*, the 'one-in-the-body', an inactive witness which is presupposed whenever there is consciousness of anything, and that the soteriology can be explained as a philosophically illegitimate biographisation of *dehin*. If the career of the *dehin* is modelled on the career of a person, then *mokṣa* is hypothesised as a post-mortem analogue of peace of mind.

The second section of the chapter continues the attempt to account for the soteriology with its philosophical problems, bringing in demographic and social factors to aid explanation. The social utility of the idea of rebirth according to merit is highlighted, and situated in the context of population expansion following from technological innovation. I suggest that the idea of *mokṣa* served as an intellectual justification for social delinquency which was widespread as a result of the disruption of many existing communities. The theory of *asakta karman* was a counter to this intellectual justification, as it maintained that even ethically dubious activity is no barrier to spiritual progress if undertaken with correct understanding and a detached attitude.

The third section scrutinises Arjuna's speeches at the outset of the text, to find out what *he* thinks the problem with killing his relatives and *gurus* is. Arjuna is primarily concerned with two things: his own future mental state, and the integrity of his kin-group, epitomised by ritual offerings to the ancestors. He does not mention the soteriology described above. I argue that his concerns predate it, and explore those concerns as representative of a kin-group ideology which may have existed with minor variations in many kin-groups which had previously been relatively isolated. The material in this section is central to the whole thesis: the historical context for the idea of *asakta karman* is to be found in the passage from the ideology of the kin-group to the ideology of a diverse and extended society. The final section of the chapter takes up Arjuna's concern with his own mental state, his fear of the responsibility for the downfall of his kin-group. I argue that Kṛṣṇa's theory of *asakta karman* was textually in place, to allay fears of post-war trauma, before the soteriology of *mokṣa* was developed, and that the text was then reworked such that *karmabandha* retarding spiritual progress would appear as the paradigmatic trauma obviated by *asakta karman*. I take up once more the idea that *mokṣa* is modelled on peace of mind, and show that the text successfully combines these two goals but leaves a gulf between the goal of *mokṣa* / peace of mind and those eventualities (prosperity, worldly success) which might be thought to presage peace of mind, a point reiterated below, 4.2.

### 3.1. Paradoxes of the *mokṣa* soteriology

The *Bhagavadgītā* makes much of what has been called the *mokṣa* context of *karmabandha*, in which the bond caused by action is equated with the tendency of death

to be followed by rebirth. *Mokṣa*, which is what happens when there is no residual *karmabandha* and hence no rebirth, can only be conceived as a state if it is the state of some disembodied or nonembodied entity. In the text, *mokṣa* is certainly conceived as a state, and an entity, *dehin* or *sarīrin*, is said to connect successive lives (2:13, 18). But what is the connection between the entity that exists in the state of *mokṣa* and the entity that connects successive lives? Is it the same entity? An awareness within the text of the *mokṣa* context, with its negative attitude to repeated rebirth caused by *karmabandha*, is shown at 2:43, 4:9, 5:17, 6:41-45, 8:6, 15, 21-28, 9:3, 20-21, 13:21, 14:14-15, 15:1-9, and 16:5, 19. *Mokṣa* is mentioned under many different descriptions.<sup>1</sup> When we investigate the text to find out what exactly it is that, if death occurs without residual *karmabandha*, ‘goes to the eternal *brahman*’ (4.31), or ‘attains the peace that lies in me (Kṛṣṇa), beyond *nirvāṇa*’ (6.15), we find, strangely, that it is the same thing that has died, the person. Despite the obvious difference between a living person and a disembodied one, both are denoted by the same simple pronoun, *sah*.

The context of rebirth in the text is characterised by the use of the verb root *lip* and the noun *kalmaṣa*, both meaning, approximately, ‘stain’. *Lip*, occurring in verses 4:14, 5:7, 10, 13:31-32 and 18:17, is what *karman* tends to do. In all these references the verb is negated, as Kṛṣṇa’s method of acting without accumulating *karmabandha* is being followed. What it is that is not being stained varies: at 4:14 it is Kṛṣṇa, at 5:7 and 10 it is an acting person (at 5:10 the stain is explicitly one of *pāpa*), at 13:31-32 it is *ātman* / *paramātman* (which apparently cannot be stained), and at 18:17 it is an acting person’s *buddhi*. *Kalmaṣa* occurs at 4:30, 5:17, 25, and 6:27, 28. It also is negated in every case, and, though not explicitly linked to action, it is always a person who has cleansed themselves of it. At 4:30 *kalmaṣa* has been removed by *yajña*, at 5:17 by *jñāna*.

The visual imagery of these concepts is striking, and is redolent of Jain theories of *karman* (Glasenapp 1942), in which the residue of action stains the *jīva*, which always falls into one of six colour categories (*leśyās*). In Jainism *jīva* becomes sullied and / or cleansed during lives, links successive lives, and eventually becomes henceforth disembodied. A similar visual presentation of *karmabandha* is given in the *Mahābhārata* when Bhīṣma, on his deathbed, narrates to Yudhiṣṭhira a conversation in which Sanatkumāra describes to Vṛtra and Uśanas the colouring of ‘souls’ (*jīvas*) by

<sup>1</sup> A summary of descriptions of the final state is given below, 3.4.

*karman* (12.271:33-55).<sup>2</sup>

A further suggestion of connection with proto-Jain circles may be seen in the *Bhagavadgītā*'s discussion of the human effects of the three *guṇas*: at 14:18 *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are said to lead one, respectively, upwards, to the middle and downwards.<sup>3</sup> These *guṇas* are linked with the colours white, red and black respectively: Zimmer (1951:230) writes that 'the six Jain *leśyās* seem to represent some system of archaic prototypes from which the basic elements of the vastly influential later theory of the *guṇas* was evolved'. At any rate, 14:18 seems to evoke the Jain idea of a vertically layered universe: in early Jainism the universe is conceived of in the shape of a person, with the human world a horizontal band at its middle, the lower forms of existence below the waist, the higher ones above it, and the liberated *jīvas* at the top of the head (J. Jaini 1916:119-124, Blacker and Loewe 1975:frontispiece, plates 21-22). Yet the notion of the cosmos as a person, though absent from the earliest layers of the Veda,<sup>4</sup> had already been presented in the personages of Puruṣa (*Rgveda* 10.90: moving upwards after death at 14:18 may then indicate rebirth in a higher *varṇa*) and Prajāpati (see especially *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*), and was to be adapted into the personage of Kṛṣṇa.

It seems appropriate to think of the *mokṣa* context, the soteriology of escape from rebirth, as proto-Jain, insofar as its basic form is preserved most clearly in Jainism.<sup>5</sup> This context is presented in the *Bhagavadgītā* as a social fact, insofar as Kṛṣṇa argues against those who renounce ritual action in order to gain liberation.<sup>6</sup> The quest for *mokṣa* is taken by Kṛṣṇa as a given, and a simple picture is adopted which conflates, under the same pronoun, that which dies and that which does not. The *dehin* of the *Bhagavadgītā* appears to be a strange entity: it is connected in the text to the entity known as *ātman*. This last word is confusing in the same way because it sometimes denotes a subtle entity which figures in the *mokṣa* soteriology, and sometimes, being a

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<sup>2</sup> Bedekar 1968:338, commenting on this passage, conjectures, on grounds of simplicity and non-technical language, that its presentation of the *leśyā* theory is older than any existing Jain one.

<sup>3</sup> See also *Mahābhārata* 14.36-39 (*Anugītā* 21-24).

<sup>4</sup> It has long been accepted that certain books of the *Rgveda* are older than others: 'the homogeneous books two to seven form the core, with the others as later additions' (J. L. Brockington 1981:8).

<sup>5</sup> To say this is nothing radical, and will not, I hope, lead to criticism from specialists in Jainism. It is well known that different 'religions' were identified only after a long period of common history, and that this identification then led different traditions retrospectively to modify their interaction with that history.

<sup>6</sup> Early Jains took exception to the killing of living things, so the animal sacrifice of the Vedic tradition was said to be an activity particularly productive of *karmabandha*.

reflexive pronoun, it simply denotes a person.<sup>7</sup> We need to investigate these subtle entities in more detail.

Although in Jainism it is the *jīva* itself which is subject to the stains of *karmabandha*, at 13:31-32 *ātman* / *paramātman* is described as unstained, staining being a factor of the person or of a faculty of the person (*buddhi*). Interestingly, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s only reference to anything like *dehin* functioning as a between-lives support for *karmabandha* (15:7-8) calls it *jīva*, and specifies that the *karmabandha* thus transferred from one life to the next remains a part of *prakṛti* throughout the process. Whatever it may be that is the ground of this transfer, it is something wholly non-*prakṛtic*, something so different from the stuff of individuality and *karmabandha* that it is difficult to imagine it being meaningfully implicated in any soteriology. The philosophy of this something seems to stand slightly apart from the soteriology of liberation. Yet the same terminology is used in both cases. For example, at 2:18-25 *dehin* is portrayed as underlying all the lives of a *karmically* coherent chain, but is not subject to change or to being affected in any way. Whatever it is that is subject to death, it is not *dehin*. Yet the text speaks at 14:20 of *dehin* attaining immortality, as if it had once been mortal. Likewise, although *ātman* (often conflated with *dehin*, *puruṣa* and *kṣetrajñā* in the text) is said to be fundamentally without the *guṇas* (*nirguṇatva*, 13:31), *dehin* is bound in the body by the *guṇas* (14:5), is conjoined with the *guṇas* when embodied and experiences them (13:21). In this latter case, it is easy to see how *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 5:11-12 can characterise *dehin* as having qualities: *dehin* is embodied in accordance with its own *guṇas* which follow from actions (presumably not *its* actions).

It is unclear whether these two ideas, of *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa dehin*, are two entities which differ in their subtlety and transcendence, which are both 'there' whenever there is a human being, but of which only the former survives if *mokṣa* occurs, or whether *dehin* is one entity, describable as *dehin* only insofar as it is embodied and thus temporarily *sagūṇa*, which enters into a second, *nirguṇa* phase (and thus attains a new kind of deathlessness) at *mokṣa*. The first of these scenarios would be soteriologically irrelevant, since nothing is gained by *mokṣa*: *nirguṇa dehin* is wholly unimplicated in the process of embodiment, and would be unaffected by end of the *sagūṇa dehin*. But, in the second scenario, we cannot make sense of the claim of 13:31

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<sup>7</sup> See Hara 1999:89: 'The word *ātman* in the *Gītā*, which is imbued with *Sāṃkhya-yoga* philosophy, usually refers to *antaḥkāraṇa* (physical organs)'.

that *ātman*, while standing in the body (*śarīrastha*), is not stained. In this scenario, this claim can only be understood as projecting back the characteristics of the *nirguṇa ātman* into the *sagūṇa dehin* which in fact is totally different. *Nirguṇa ātman* is not to be found in conjunction with a body except if that body has managed to get rid of *karmabandha* (either by renouncing *karman* or, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, by adopting the method of *asakta karman*), in which case *sagūṇa dehin* has already become *nirguṇa ātman*. But the claim of 13:31 appears to be a general statement about *dehin*, rather than a specific description of the *dehins* of the soteriologically successful. So we are forced into the soteriologically problematic first scenario with its doubled *dehin*.

The doubled *dehin* is a feature of several Upaniṣadic passages:

‘Whoever follows the *guṇas*, and is a doer of fruiting actions, partakes of [the fruit of] what has been done. With all forms and three *guṇas*, going by three paths, the overseer of breaths moves about [within *samsāra*] by means of its own actions. In association with *saṃkalpa* and *ahaṃkāra*, it is thumb-sized, with a form like the sun. But another, spoke-point-sized one is seen by means of the qualities of buddhi and *ātman*.’ (*Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 5:7-8. See also *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4:6, *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 2:7-3:2, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1:1-2).

Zaehner (1969:132-133) distinguishes in a similar manner between the ‘supreme self’ and the ‘individual self’. The latter ‘is associated with an individual psychosomatic mechanism –insofar, that is, as it is a *dehin*, it is always being born and dying again until it is ultimately released’. But *mokṣa*, indicating no further birth, is not the release of the individual self but its extinction,<sup>8</sup> and the supreme self, which ‘as it is in itself... is never involved in the process of transmigration’, likewise has nothing to gain from *mokṣa*, being identical before and after its occurrence. A strict chronological separation between these two selves must be sustained if the picture is to be soteriologically suggestive. Then, at least, the individual self striving for release would be striving for its own transformation into a supreme self. But even then we have to question to what extent this can be thought of as a transformation of *itself*, rather than just the end of the self and the start of something else. It is impossible to maintain identity between self before *mokṣa* and ‘self’ after, without conceiving of *mokṣa* as an infinitely long embodiment in a subtle and blissful realm. But this is precisely what it is not: it is no embodiment at all, a radical departure, a blowing-out (*nirvāṇa*).

The soteriological scheme must refigure the radicality of eternal non-embodiedness into a *mokṣa* which has a subject identical to that which was once suffering, stained and striving. But the *Bhagavadgītā* and many other ancient Indian

<sup>8</sup> Rāmānuja seems to misunderstand the *Bhagavadgītā* on this point: describing the perfected person, he says that ‘as soon as he is released from his body he will attain the bliss of experiencing the *ātman*’ (van Buitenen 1968:90). See also Lipner 1986:78-79, 118-119.

texts speak of something which, even while there is suffering, staining and striving, is not itself doing those things. This 'supreme self' is not a counter in a soteriological scheme: its philosophical import lies elsewhere. It figures as *ātman* in the early Upaniṣads, as a counter in the explanation of experience.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *prakṛti* and the three *guṇas* provide a complete explanation of the constitution of the world and the occurrence of change and event within it, whether or not creatures exist. Humans, however, have a stubborn intuition that the quality of experience and awareness which they privately share cannot be accounted for as a permutation of things. As people become aware of their awareness, they see that it seems to *contain* the things that they are aware of. The fact that people *witness* events as well as taking part in them leads to the impression that there must be 'something' (but not any *thing*) as well as stuff, but qualitatively different from it: an abiding awareness or subjectness.

At 2:16-25 *dehin* is defined as *sat*, as 'that of which there is no unbecoming'. The characterisation of subjectness (the subject viewed non-objectively, as a quality rather than a quantity) as *sat* and deathless immediately creates an ontological gulf between that subject, the *dehin*, and any possible perishable object of its experience. Although *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6 abstracts *sat* as the changeless quality of objectness, this objectness would not admit to being experienceable as an object: the sphere of the phenomenal, of events and things, is coextensive with that of the ephemeral, and to suggest that *dehin* is deathless is therefore to set up subject(ness) and object(s) as incommensurable paradigms. Thus the sequel to Kṛṣṇa's linking *sat* with *dehin* is that *dehin* cannot act. 'Experiencer' (or, better, 'experience') and 'doer' are shown to be radically different types of idea: the latter is objective, the former is not. There is no experiencing object that could be satisfied, completed, altered or touched by the experienceable or by its experience thereof. With respect to the linkage of *sat* and *dehin*, it should be noted that, from the human viewpoint, *dehin* is the closest and most important instance of 'the not-unbecoming': the only 'entity' whose passing away could not possibly be experienced is the experiencing subject, subjectness or experience *per se*. Even here, what is meant by *dehin* can only be expressed in terms of what it is not, for when subjectness is being spoken of, what is really being alluded to is some quality of contentless awareness, which becomes subjectness only in association with an object. This quality can be neither approached nor moved away from, it is an undeniably existent no-thingness, a contentless *potential to be* subject. Sinari (1982:134) calls it a



'transcendental vacuity'. In human self-analysis it displays a self-selection effect as a timeless necessity: in Kantian terms it is a synthetic *a priori* (Körner 1955:70-104).<sup>9</sup>

If personal identity, the natural 'I', is connected with this abiding subjectness, the way is open for soteriologies speculating on the possibility of disentangling *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*, *ātman* from *saṃsāra*, and *jīva* from *ajīva*. It is interesting to note that when *mokṣa* is described by the text, the entity attaining it is often not the mysterious *dehin* but a person. This seems to be strange, since, in the absence of either a body or the *karmabandhic* residue of having been embodied, we would expect there to be nothing to distinguish one *ex-dehin* from another. If personal identity is taken seriously enough to be thought of as a problem for *dehin*, then it must also be taken seriously in the final analysis, as the individual subject of *mokṣa*. Such a notion is close to the European notion of a soul. Werner (1988:76-80), explaining that this word connotes a permanent substance, carrier of personal identity, warns of the damage that can be done by importing such an idea into the Indian context. He shows that, in Vedic texts, the individual organism is a temporary 'structural functioning unit', functional enough to link successive embodiments *x* and *y*, but temporary enough not to be the same as that which links successive embodiments *y* and *z*. But also, particularly in the later Vedic texts, there is a transcendental tier of personality, the 'creative and supportive force of the universe or of reality as a whole', the *sat* subjectness, without trace of individuality. Both these notions, the temporary person and the timeless subjectness, are called *ātman*: Werner describes this word as 'referring not only to man's inmost (universal) core or self, but also to the outer layers of his personality with which he normally identifies himself and which form his phenomenal self'. He is quite right in observing that conflating these notions is philosophically damaging, and that the word 'soul' refers to a European tradition of such conflation, but there is a parallel Indian tradition, and ample evidence in Indian texts to show that this conflation was widespread quite early. The

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<sup>9</sup> Derrida 1973:147-148 comes close to this idea of *dehin* when he wonders about 'a presence and self-presence of the subject before speech or its signs, a subject's self-presence in a silent and intuitive consciousness', the supposition 'that prior to signs and outside them, and excluding every trace and differance [*sic*], something such as consciousness is possible'. The self-presence vital to this idea links it, according to Derrida, to a privileging of the present. This is, to be sure, an arbitrary and problematic privilege, which shows that 'presence is a determination and effect within a system', a system moreover within which the past, especially, has become the Other. But it is not fair to equate consciousness-as-such with presence and then attack it on the basis that presence is a differentially constructed idea. All this shows is that, according to the initial formulation of consciousness-as-such as something to wonder about, neither presence nor any other analytic tool can assist the wondering. The problematic of presence as seemingly time-bound is thus a change of subject: more to the point would be to ask about the attraction and peculiarity of the initial wondering, the conjecture of consciousness-as-such. Such wondering is precisely about the possibility of its emergence from some 'where' other than just the world of signification.

soteriological tone of the later Upaniṣads and the Epics rests upon this conflation, which is the only way to link the changing, striving self to the released self. I shall use the word 'soul' henceforth to denote such a conflated idea in the soteriological context. This conflation constitutes an explanation for the Buddhist rejections of the notion of a persisting *ātman*: such an *ātman*, if it exists, is nothing to do with the temporary ingredients of personality, so whatever follows from *mokṣa* cannot be described in terms of personality, and *mokṣa* is *nirvāṇa* (blowing-out).

The *Bhagavadgītā* is keen to explain that, during human life, there is this subjectness persisting beyond personality, this other existence-category of *dehin*, for otherwise there is no explanation of human consciousness as such. If *prakṛti* is the ground of being, *dehin* is the ground of experience. Though *dehin* should in no way be identified with the natural 'I' of everyday personal identity, nonetheless it is through the 'I'-reflex that *dehin* is instantiated, for an 'I' is said to both exist and experience. Indeed, there is no imaginable experiencer which is not an 'I', yet many things are known which exist but are not 'I's, so in an important sense it is subjectness which is the salient aspect of personhood, by which a person might be distinguished from a non-person, but not a person from another person.<sup>10</sup>

The insight that the quintessence of selfhood is contentless, unchangeable and untouchable is the starting point of Kṛṣṇa's theory in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and is introduced to demonstrate that there is no cause for grief no matter who is killed by whom. The distinction between the perishable and the imperishable aspects of a person is initially made in order to promote Arjuna's *sukha*: '[*śarīrin*, the one characterised by a body] is unmanifest, unthinkable, said to be untransformable. Therefore, knowing this, you ought not to grieve' (2:25). As the text develops chapter by chapter (and we increasingly suspect the influence of different interpolations: see above, 2.4), a move is made from *dehin* as a philosophical category to *ātman* as an individualised transmigrating soul with its own history and future. This move is not a smooth one. It corresponds to a gradual shift in goals from *sukha* to *mokṣa*. The initial *dehin*

<sup>10</sup> Hence the ambiguity that has been perceived in the text on the question of whether *dehin* is one or many. Śāṅkara insists that *mokṣa* when attained is a non-individual state: '*jīva*... is like the *ākāśa* (space) in the jar, which is limited by the *upādhi* of the jar. This *ākāśa* of the jar is but a portion of the infinite *ākāśa* and becomes one with the latter on the destruction of the jar which is the cause of limitation' (Sastri 1977:403). Śāṅkara is making sense here since, in the absence of *asat*, the very ground of individuation is lacking. But here again, then, is the soteriological paradox: the striver is individuated, and therefore *mokṣa* should not be thought of as its becoming immortal, but as its death. Although the striver is constantly changing, this *mokṣa* is the death of change, and therefore the death of that which constitutes the striver. The transcendent, *sat* self can never be a constituent of anything.

perspective is not necessarily anything to do with a *mokṣa* soteriology: the idea that the vital aspect of a person is ever present in all people, and that every other aspect of a person is irredeemably ephemeral, can promote an *asakta* attitude, and thus promote *sukha*, without any need for the postulation of an ultimate destination for *dehin*. As soon as *dehin* is extrapolated beyond a situation of embodiment, it becomes something else a person can be *sakta* with respect to: but the initial point in introducing the idea of *dehin* was apparently to remove the likelihood of a *sakta* attitude.

When *mokṣa* is thought of as a goal, the tendency is to visualise a succession of lives and to extrapolate a common element which eventually 'succeeds' in not being reborn at all. Even if, as in Buddhism, no common element is extrapolated and no speculations are made on what the final result might be, still a chain of a finite number of links is imagined, each link being a life abutting other lives. Once the idea is accepted that *sakta karman* has post-mortem consequences, there is a distinctive causal connection between the psycho-physical state of one creature and that of another, even if they are widely separated in time and space. But of what can this connection possibly consist? When a person has died, and *dehin* is no longer connected with this particular *deha*, it does not cease to be, for it is imperishable, yet it cannot be thought of or known except as *dehin*, that is, as embodied, as instantiated; so if it is asked 'where is it?', the answer is likely to be 'in another *deha*'.<sup>11</sup> But there can be no question of the *dehin* somehow carrying *karmabandha* from one life to the next: *dehin* is simple, changeless and insubstantial. Though it may have witnessed certain actions of a previous life, it was by definition nothing else to do with them. Reverting to a conventional first person, it may be observed in any case that I cannot now reap the fruits of my actions in a previous life, for the specific identity suggested by 'I' and 'my' is derived from the complex and multifarious nature of *prakṛti* and cannot apply to *dehin*. Actions in a previous life cannot have been *my* actions. I reap the fruits of the actions of others, then: this is true in an obvious way, but when augmented by the operation of *karmabandha* will not yield soteriology or morality, but chaos.

There is thus a problem in trying to build a 'biography' for the soul on the model of the biography of a human person. Nothing can ever happen to the *dehin*, it has no history and no destiny in any way comparable to that of a person. Yet on the whole the

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<sup>11</sup> Discounting the various subtle entities that have occasionally been postulated to spatio-temporally link the *dehin* with its next *deha*, the only other likely answers are 'disembodied' (i.e. in a state of *mokṣa*) and 'in all the other *dehas* still'. It is likely that this last possibility, which could never yield an individualistic soteriology, is the only philosophically sound one.

soteriological significance of the *Bhagavadgītā*, based as this is upon the *mokṣa* context, depends on such a spurious ‘biography of the soul’. The soteriological and the socio-political are aligned here: the biographised soul, the result of the conflation of two *ātman*s, is a powerful ideological tool legitimating certain types of public morality through a proximate soteriology of rebirth in excellent realms. Whether this excellence is considered hedonistically or in terms of chances of reaching *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*, it appeals to the self-interest of the acting person.

The only way to preserve both the fairness and the intelligibility of the *samsāra* / *mokṣa* scheme is to admit some kind of real entity underlying successive lives. This is exactly what the Jains did: their *jīva* is a *thing* in the same way as any material entity is. *Jīva* and *ajīva* are the two subdivisions of *tattvas* in Jainism: these two being ontologically commensurate, it is odd, but not senseless, to speak of *jīva* being stained by *karman*. But to envisage *jīva* in this way, as an object, means that it cannot serve as an explanation of subjectness in the same way as the Upaniṣadic *ātman* can. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *dehin* is at the outset described in transcendent terms as beyond being affected,<sup>12</sup> and its conflation, in terms of *mokṣa*, with the very person it is introduced in contrast to, is unseemly.

It is important to note that the problem under discussion only arises when a distant *mokṣa* is to be striven after. It may be suggested that this scenario was at one stage not part of the *Bhagavadgītā*. It may be that the text made use of a philosophy of *dehin* to address Arjuna’s problem and give him reason not to grieve, and that subsequently the text was amended to address the *mokṣa* soteriology of a biographised *dehin*. When Kṛṣṇa expounds *dehin* at 2:12-30 he does suggest that when *deha* perishes *dehin* will take another *deha*, but he does not thereby describe *dehin* as capable of any sort of progress: the idea of perfection of the *dehin* through numerous lives, and the *mokṣa* concept which this involves, though alluded to in sundry verses, is only properly introduced later (6:37-45), when Arjuna speculates that one might, though applying Kṛṣṇa’s technique, fail to ensure ‘the perfection of *yoga*’ before dying. While Kṛṣṇa moves blithely from one context to the next, there is no recognition in the text of the

<sup>12</sup> See also *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2:18-19, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1:5. The *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* have the same verse 2:19, but *Bhagavadgītā* 2:20 corresponds to *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2:18, so this is probably not a significant numerical parallel. J. L. Brockington 1998:12-13 lists those *Bhagavadgītā* verses that have Upaniṣadic equivalents. He thinks that the *Bhagavadgītā* quotes certain Upaniṣads, ‘deliberately using them for their prestige value’, but acknowledges that the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* may be quoting the *Bhagavadgītā*. Relative dating is extremely speculative, and there may have been other texts, since lost, which explain the parallels.

problems this must cause for the metaphysics already in use.

The idea of *ātman* being born in a particular situation as a result of what happened in a different life requires an individualisation of *ātman* which seems to go against what has already been established about *ātman / dehin*, namely that it is *aja, sarvagata, acala, acintya* and *avikārya* (unborn, all-pervading, unmoving, unthinkable and untransformable, 2:21-25). In contrast, the individualised identity of persons with respect to their actions and experiences is given by their psycho-physical continuity long before any speculations on what the ultimate ground of this continuity, if there is one, might be. To individualise and biographise the transmigrating soul is to abstract and extrapolate the notion of 'identity of the subject' into murky waters, for the 'identity of the subject' in *this* life was only sought as part of a practical accommodation of the given separateness of persons. There is no related sense in which the separateness or individuality of *cittasaṃtānas* or of *ātman*-destinies could be given: indeed, evidence for such individuality only exists insofar as hypothetical perfected persons claim knowledge of past lives. The theoretical undercarriage of the *mokṣa* soteriology is thus problematic in a manner which the initial *dehin / sukha* context escapes, for the unknown *dehin* in this more immediate context is less of a theoretical counter than it is an explanation of experience. Since a common-sense personal identity underlies human goals as a matter of course, *dehin* is not required in order to make *sukha* intelligible as a goal, but only to give a philosophical perspective which makes its attainment easier.

In the history of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *mokṣa* context may have been grafted onto an existing *sukha* context which had already developed a technique of *asakta karman* for the attainment of its goal. If this was the case with the *Bhagavadgītā* it might be expected that the same process be found occurring elsewhere –in Buddhism for example, where the goal is the cessation of *duḥkha*, with *nirvāṇa* being the distant paradigmatic guarantor of this possibility. Like the *Bhagavadgītā*, Buddhism had a scheme for explaining why people experience and behave in the way they do, becoming attached to the idea of themselves (or in fact him or herself: phenomenologically, there is no plural here) as an abiding agent where in fact there is only a constantly shifting interplay of natural forces. When the soteriological object is extended beyond death, and the *Bhagavadgītā* utilises the Upaniṣadic *ātman* to underpin this continuity, Buddhism realises the philosophical difficulties in this move and instead denies the right to invoke a soul which could do any such thing. Whilst Buddhism has often been criticised for a perceived inability to explain rebirth, *karmabandha* and the intelligibility of the distant

goal without any 'self' to appeal to, Murti points out (1955:31-35) that the *ātman*-position does not render these ideas any more intelligible than the *anātman*-position, and it may well be that Buddhism took its *anātman* stand against the difficulties outlined above. The only truly philosophical solution, that of denying the post-mortem extrapolation of the goal, was, it seems, not a practical possibility for the early Buddhist councils, presumably because of the now popular and religious nature of the project being undertaken, which had much to gain from establishing norms of behaviour using the idea of post-mortem *karmabandhic* redress. All the Buddhists could do was to stress the apophatic nature of the goal, to call it *nirvāṇa* instead of *mokṣa*.

In textual traditions, the nature of the project embodied by texts will change through time, and the editorial presentation, packaging and categorisation of textual material will track this change. It seems likely that a text such as the *Mahābhārata* has been in service, during the period of its development and often in fragmentary form, to many different textual projects, philosophical, educational, narrative, rhetorical, socio-propagandist and so on. The use of writing would have allowed the textualisation of projects which previously would have worked in other ways or not at all. Certainly the way the text presents itself, as a universally relevant document of saving power to all who hear it (Fitzgerald 1991), indicates a high degree of popularisation<sup>13</sup> far removed from the exclusive martial and courtly context in which strands of it may earlier have functioned. It may well be that the *mokṣa* soteriology in the text belongs wholly to this popular phase of the text's history.

### 3.2. Renunciative ideology and the emergence of a new polity

It was mentioned in chapter two that the presence of a renunciative ideology was an aspect of the *Mahābhārata*'s social context which may have constrained its evolution or composition. Attention will now be focused on how this ideology and the *brāhmaṇical* rebuttal of it affected the *Bhagavadgītā*. The hypothesised historical scheme is that the *Bhagavadgītā*, from being a moment in a heroic and agonistic narrative contest, expanded through adopting and developing a popular renunciative soteriology, and was later supplemented with *bhakti* and Kṛṣṇa-ist interpretations.

The role of *brāhmaṇas* in the different phases of this scheme is somewhat

<sup>13</sup> To say that the text became popular is not necessarily to say that it was deliberately or selfconsciously popularised.

problematic. The opposition to renunciation is commonly thought to be *brāhmaṇical*, since it safeguards Vedic ritual, but the *bhakti* sensibility, in contrast, downplays the religious value of traditional Vedic behaviour. The answer to this puzzle is perhaps to be found by exploding the anachronistic idea that it is clear what a *brāhmaṇa* is, or that *brāhmaṇas* constituted a homogenous and readily identifiable hereditary group. Many texts discuss what it is that makes one a *brāhmaṇa*: though the identification of different abstract forces (*brahman*, *kṣatra*, *viś*) enlivening the social body is very old, a rigid typology of four hereditary *varṇas* is not asserted until the time of the Dharmaśāstras. The presentation of the *varṇa* social system as intrinsic to the structure of creation (see for example *Ṛgveda* 10.90), is, as B. K. Smith (1994) points out, a textual legitimisation of the power of the *brāhmaṇa* mythmakers. To insist that the categorisation is hereditary, as the *Mahābhārata* does (*Dhammapada* 26:11 takes the opposite view), is to ensure that power for one's descendants henceforth. Goldman's study (1977) of the Bhārgava myths in the *Mahābhārata* stresses that the Bhṛgus were (p. 4) 'a group set apart from their fellow *brāhmaṇas*'. Heesterman's hypothesis (1985, 1993) of an agonistic tribal ritual complex antedating the individualistic ritualism of the Brāhmaṇas presumably also allows for the emergence of *brāhmaṇa* groups not involved in ritualism. In any case, there are sound socio-ritual reasons for opposing an ascendant renunciationism even in non-Vedic, non-*brāhmaṇical* contexts. It was not just *brāhmaṇical* social and ritual traditions which stood to be abandoned.

The *Mahābhārata* and other texts bear witness to a society, around the middle of the first millenium BCE, in which shifting tribal alliances occurred against a backdrop of more centralised cultural forms,<sup>14</sup> under the influence of urbanisation and economic and technological change.<sup>15</sup> The social dislocation attendant on these developments spawned a new individualism, and an ideology of renunciation of social obligations to concentrate instead on higher matters. The pursuit of deliverance from *samsāra* became quite a phenomenon,<sup>16</sup> and became a justification for lifestyles more and more

<sup>14</sup> Administrative centralisation such as that of various ancient empires, most notably the Mauryas, was usually short-lived and may have been largely cosmetic (see Thapar 1987). Ideological centralisation (Sanskritisation / *brāhmaṇisation*) is much more to the point here.

<sup>15</sup> See R. S. Sharma 1991, Kosambi 1965:72-132. Thapar 1992:104: 'Kosambi's treatment of the rise of the Buddhist, Jain and other sects of that time links them to major technological changes and to urbanism. But above all he maintains that they reflect a situation of detribalisation in which they attempt to reach out across castes to a wider social range through their universal ethic'.

<sup>16</sup> No doubt the abandoning of mainstream society for some mythologised subculture is an ancient phenomenon, but this particular powerful mythologisation is a historical development. Larson 1969:95 says that when the concepts of *karma* and *samsāra* appear for the first time in *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 'the doctrines are there taught as esoteric or secret teachings, and it is obvious that they did

irresponsible in terms of ritual, social or even normal human behaviour. *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* 1.1.1:4 says that ‘the person who cares for their kin and companions is a fool’ (translation by Basham, de Bary 1958:53): other ascetics were known to starve themselves to death (Settar 1990:25-104, Basham 1951:127-131). Both the *Bhagavadgītā* and Buddhism sought, in differing localities and differing milieus, to temper this kind of asceticism (Upadhyaya 1971), which even in its moderate forms spoke out against the production and nurture of offspring.

This period of the *Bhagavadgītā*’s gestation seems to have been one of flux, transition and redefinition. There was at this time, as will be detailed below, a soteriological shift from the axis of *pitṛloka* to the axis of *mokṣa*. Heesterman’s analysis (1985, 1993) of the change in the sacrificial tradition is of particular note in this regard. This change, which he illustrates through an analysis of lacunae in the Brāhmaṇas, revealing an agonistic sacrificial tradition overlaid by individualistic ritualism, may well be connected to the social changes in marriage patterns and communal identity which Held refers to (1935:36-97), and which in conjunction with technological and agricultural breakthroughs may have ushered in a new world very swiftly.<sup>17</sup> Kosambi (1964) makes useful speculations on these issues, which have been quoted above, 2.3. Also illustrative here is J. L. Brockington (1998:27-28): ‘the largely pastoral society of the heroic age in which lineages were the main political factor is replaced during the period of growth of the Epics by a clearly agrarian society accompanied by the rise of urban centres and the emergence of a state system’. This change is also an explanatory framework for the shift to the *mokṣa* soteriology and its anti-social pursuit. The *Mahābhārata* certainly knows this change: it selfconsciously documents the period in which an old political system, of shifting alliances between many small semi-nomadic communities, was replaced by an institutionalised overarching monarchy. As it does so it laments the demise of the old *kṣatriya* code of chivalry, symbolised by the fact that the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes, are only able to win the war by scandalously breaching the conventions of combat.<sup>18</sup> When Gāndhārī, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s wife, is told that Duryodhana

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not represent a widely held view. In the period between the oldest Upaniṣads and the rise of Buddhism (6th century B.C.), however, the doctrines evidently took on great importance’.

<sup>17</sup> The ritual complex of the isolated *yajamāna* was brought under attack, perhaps quite soon after its emergence, by the renouncer’s rejection of it and the *bhaktā*’s deconstruction of it. Its defence, ultimately, was in terms of its environmental necessity: the ritualistic rationale of cosmic regeneration seems to have been a very ancient one, predating individualistic interpretations of *pitṛloka* as *svarga*. This will be discussed in chapter four.

<sup>18</sup> Bhīṣma is defeated when he refuses to fight Śikhandin, who was once a woman: Arjuna shoots arrows at him from behind Śikhandin’s back (*Mahābhārata* 6.114). Droṇa is defeated while incapacitated by



and all her other sons have been killed in the war, she admits, even in her grief, that they were a bad lot who have brought about their own destruction through their folly and greed, but she is nonetheless furious with Yudhiṣṭhira, her new king, because he has allowed Duryodhana to be defeated in such a shameful and *adharmic* manner. She is only just persuaded not to utter a terrible curse upon him (*Mahābhārata* 11.13-15).

Renunciation does not appear as an ideology until after Heesterman's agonistic scheme has died: the *Mahābhārata* war is the last one remembered in the old system of sacred battle, the dicing match of 3.53-67 the last remembered potlatch (see below, 4.2). Cultural centralisation and the new solitary ritual complex go hand in hand: this new complex claimed to continue to offer the old ritual goals of fame, fortune, and a world continuously sustained by human propriety, but this claim was seen to be unconvincing. It may be that centralisation and bureaucratisation conveyed a feeling of impotence to many, whose immediate world would not then have been so obviously sustained by the propriety of the immediate humans. Moreover, renunciation in some form had been a feature of certain agonistic practices (the Pāṇḍavas' lengthy forest exile, for example) without then being reflected in the new ritual complex (Bronkhorst 1998:45-66).

The ritual action which renunciative ideology condemns as generative of *karmabandha* comprises all economic and reproductive activity: to renounce is to cease to be a producer. Whilst renouncers lived frugal lives, deliberate self-starvation was a rarity, and the fashion for renunciation was sustained by the institutionalisation of begging in Buddhism and Jainism. The ability of a society to allow voluntary non-productivity for a significant minority indicates food surplus, which is explained by the rise in productivity following the introduction of new agricultural technologies. As Thapar (1984:70-115) notes, such a rise in productivity occurred much earlier in the middle Ganges valley, where rice-growing was prevalent, than in the north-west where the *Mahābhārata* is set: hence, by the time conditions arose that could sustain institutions of renunciation in Āryāvarta, such institutions were already established in the east.<sup>19</sup>

The Vedic soteriological and ritual traditions had much to lose from the threat of

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grief: he has been tricked into thinking that his son has been slain, by hearing of the death of an elephant with the same name (*Mahābhārata* 7.164-165). Karna is attacked and felled while attempting to free his chariot from a rut it has fallen into (*Mahābhārata* 8.66-67). Duryodhana is conquered by Bhīma striking him below the belt in a mace duel (*Mahābhārata* 9.57).

<sup>19</sup> Though the *Mahābhārata* does not explicitly mention Buddhism, it must postdate it. In any case, Buddhism itself admits to having been established in a context that included various renunciative fraternities.

the renunciative ideology. The Vedic ritual tradition involved its own philosophical soteriology, concentrating on the attainment of glorious ancestral worlds earned by correct ritual action. This soteriology, however, was jeopardised by the *mokṣa* soteriology, which discouraged traditional social and ritual actions. To preserve the rationale for these actions in the face of an increasingly dominant critique, Kṛṣṇa explains in the *Bhagavadgītā* that it is not action as such which binds one to rebirth, but one's mental attitude to it. Hence society can be actively maintained at the same time as one is saving one's soul.<sup>20</sup> This was the eventual soteriological response of the Vedic tradition, as given by the *Bhagavadgītā*, to the renunciative threat:<sup>21</sup> the *saṃsāra / mokṣa* scheme was accommodated, but with an adjustment to the causes of *karmabandha*. On the ritual side, the threat was one of abandonment of the cult of *yajña*, partly because of the post-mortem consequences of killing, and partly because of a disinterest with prestige and social acclaim, these being two aspects of the new focus on the progress of the soul. The Vedic response to the ritual threat was a corollary of its tweaking of the causes of rebirth: the need to maintain the cosmos through ritual was satisfied by discouraging the more extravagant ceremonies and by stressing that the basic ritual calendar, if undertaken in a certain spirit, would not cause *karmabandha*.

The soteriological and the ritual responses to the renunciative threat are both written into the *Mahābhārata* extensively. Yet it may be surmised that this was not always the case: the text contains some clearly renunciationist passages. Also, given that the renunciative threat is a historical phenomenon, it is quite possible that the story of the *Mahābhārata* war, including a *Bhagavadgītā* episode where Arjuna hesitates and has to be persuaded to fight, was in circulation long before anyone was seriously worried about their physical actions binding their immaterial soul to subsequent rebirth. The text bears substantial traces of a time before centralisation and before the rise of the new soteriology. As we shall explore in the next section, Arjuna's initial statement of his reasons for not fighting, and a good deal of what Kṛṣṇa says to try to make him fight, are independent of any quest for *mokṣa*.

<sup>20</sup> Or, put the other way around, one can save one's soul at the same time as actively maintaining society. Slaje 2000, tracing the origins of the idea of *jīvanmukta* to the theory of *asakta karman* in the *Mahābhārata*, may be interpreted as emphasising the positive aspects of renunciation (*i.e. mokṣa*) which were thereby made available to householders also. I suggest, conversely, that *asakta karman* was devised to undercut the grounds upon which renouncers had built their critique of society, and that the soteriology of *mokṣa* was initially an accessory to that critique.

<sup>21</sup> There were presumably never enough renouncers to threaten the continuity of society, but, in terms of discursive justification, there was the threat of losing all credible intellectual defence for the lifestyle of the householder.

Diamond (1998a:265-292) describes the process whereby human societies expand in size due to interaction between environmental resources and new technologies. In certain areas at certain times, hunter-gatherer lifestyles have been abandoned in favour of farming, which can sustain much higher population densities. As population densities rise, new forms of conflict resolution emerge. In societies consisting of small numbers of people (reckoned in dozens: these are what Diamond calls bands), conflict resolution is usually achieved through fighting: lives are lost, and violent feuds may last for many generations.<sup>22</sup> When population rises, forms of government are required in order to manage conflict resolution between strangers: as population expands above a certain level, it is necessary to have a hierarchical structure with certain groups having a monopoly on the use of force.<sup>23</sup> Descriptions of the *kṣatriya* in ancient Indian texts seem to fit in with this picture: *kṣatriyas* have a duty to rule, to prevent the strong taking advantage of the weak, and to liaise with the *kṣatriyas* of neighbouring groups to ensure peace. Interestingly, Diamond notes (p. 275) that when societies expand into hierarchised chiefdoms, a redistributive economy arises, with chiefs collecting tribute from the population and redistributing according to need or social prestige. Such a redistributive economy lies behind the Vedic institution of *yajña*, which will be explored in the next chapter. Once there is an elite group with a monopoly on redistribution, the way is open for huge disparities of wealth between the elite and the commoners. Discussing ways in which such 'kleptocracies' might legitimate their social and economic superiority, Diamond mentions the construction of ideology or religion:

'Chiefdoms characteristically have an ideology, precursor to an institutionalised religion, that buttresses the chief's authority. The chief may either combine the offices of political leader and priest in a single person, or may support a separate group of kleptocrats (that is, priests) whose function is to provide ideological justification for the chiefs... Besides justifying the transfer of wealth to kleptocrats, institutionalised religion brings two other important benefits to centralised societies. First, shared ideology or religion helps solve the problem of how unrelated individuals are to live together without killing each other, by providing them with a bond not based on kinship.<sup>24</sup> Second, it gives people a motive, other than genetic self-interest, for sacrificing their lives on behalf of others.<sup>25</sup> At the cost of a few society members who die in battle as soldiers, the whole society becomes much more effective at conquering other societies or resisting attacks' (p. 278).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See above, 2.3, for a discussion of cycles of violence in the *Mahābhārata*.

<sup>23</sup> The 'social insects' (ants, bees *etc.*) manage population density through social differentiation and a kind of caste system.

<sup>24</sup> The division between the *āryas* and the *dāsas* or *dasyus* in ancient Indian texts is illustrative in this regard: unrelated *āryas* build bonds by demonising others, in a classic scapegoat mechanism. See Girard 1986.

<sup>25</sup> See 2:31-32, where a *dharmic* battle is described as an open door to heaven (*svarga*).

<sup>26</sup> Analyses such as Diamond's are often rejected as reductionistic, but this is unfair, particularly since reductionism is a criterion of any understanding of anything. By 'religion' he primarily means a widely operating sociological and ideological structure, something thoroughly mundane. This is not to say that

When, as an inevitable correlate of increasing population density, chiefdoms conglomerate to form states, the social and ethnic mix becomes larger, and the insider / outsider ideology must give way to a more inclusive ideology if the state is to be viable.<sup>27</sup> In the Indian context, the ideology of reincarnation according to *karmabandha* helped to legitimate the social hierarchies and inequalities that were already in place.<sup>28</sup> Further, such an ideology could be used to establish basic behavioural norms across very different groups: the appearance of normative Dharmaśāstras occurred at this same stage of development. It is worth noting that, whilst post-mortem divine judgement in the Abrahamic religious traditions may have the same effect of normalising certain ethical and behavioural conventions, in the Indian case, because behaviour in previous lives can explain one's present lot, ideology provides an additional means for the peaceful coexistence of the poor with the rich.

If the ideology of reincarnation and *karmabandha* served to ossify social inequalities, the renunciative tradition was able to challenge those inequalities by stressing the possibility of escaping from *karmabandha* altogether.<sup>29</sup> The introduction of *mokṣa* can be seen as a subversive move: with this move, the idea of being good in order to make good next life was stripped of all potency, since having a next life denoted that one had not made good at all. From this perspective, it would be no coincidence that the renunciative traditions were sceptical of an institutionalised hereditary *varṇa* system: they can be seen to constitute a political protest against the emerging *brāhmaṇical* hegemony and a refusal to accept the ideology offered in its support.<sup>30</sup> If, as I am suggesting, the idea of *mokṣa* from *saṃsāra* was introduced as an

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there are no other aspects to religious phenomena, that they do not originate in situations of individual praxis and transcendence or that this is the only way of looking at them. What is under discussion here is not the origin of religious ideas, but the occasion of their use in texts that become ideological programmes lasting several millennia.

<sup>27</sup> Lincoln 1981 establishes correlations between a society's economic system (mode of production) and its religious structures, focusing on a reconstruction of ancient Indo-Iranian society. His analysis is persuasive, and reveals ideology to be a form of economy. Diamond's insight works along the same lines. Population increase, by necessitating interaction between different micro-economies, produces a capitalistic macro-economy containing many micro-ideologies united within a macro-ideology of free will which can 'explain' difference.

<sup>28</sup> The doctrine of rebirth according to *karmabandha* need not be thought of as necessarily *brāhmaṇical*, nor as applying only to ritual *karman*. See Bodewitz 1997-98.

<sup>29</sup> The idea of quitting *saṃsāra* is predicated on repeated reincarnation, but the notion of achieving immortality in *brahman* predated repeated reincarnation, and was a non-conformist, knowledge-based method of attaining what the *brāhmaṇas* asserted could only be attained by ritual action. See Bodewitz 1996: this non-conformism is represented in terms of escape from *saṃsāra* as soon as repeated reincarnation becomes widely accepted.

<sup>30</sup> Dixit 1978:8: '[early Jain theoreticians] were somehow actuated by a feeling of non-co-operation in relation to the urban civilisation along with its basic institutions'.

intellectual correlate of unease with the *brāhmanical* organisation of the society justified through *karmabandha*, then this can explain some of the philosophical difficulties which we have discussed concerning the *mokṣa* soteriology. If this soteriology emerged within a socio-political negotiation, its philosophical rough edges may have been comparatively insignificant: moreover, if it was a radical re-figuring of an existing ideological scheme, it is unsurprising that there should be such rough edges.

As things turned out it was possible, using the idea of *asakta karman*, to integrate the soteriology of *mokṣa* into the reincarnatory scheme while at the same time allowing *mokṣa* to be attained through action. Further, the integration of *bhakti* into the soteriological picture meant that existing religious sensibilities could be enlisted in defence of orthopraxy: see chapter six below.

In light of the perspective given by Diamond, we can observe that the *Mahābhārata* seems to document a change in the way society is organised. The text makes it clear that, with the war, a whole way of life has died. Duryodhana espouses an uncompromising *kṣatriya* ethic:

‘Bṛhaspati said that the business of kings is other than the business of the folk, and therefore [his] own profit is always zealously to be thought of by the king. The conduct of the *kṣatriya* is directed to victory. He in his own conduct, be it *dharma* or *adharmā*.’ (*Mahābhārata* 2.50:14-15).

The events of the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative show this self-serving interpretation of *kṣatriyadharmā* to be unworkable. This is because society has changed: iron technology leads to new agricultural techniques, population growth, economic surplus, luxury goods, trade, urbanisation, expansion of areas of interest, new ideas, and eventually a wide, diffuse and varied polity with interests in common. The old *kṣatriyadharmā* will not work for this new world, particularly as new technologies have devised more and more efficient ways of killing people. Hence the text is involved in creating a new kind of *dharma*, in which the ‘social virtues’ are given greater emphasis.

The *Mahābhārata* contains many instances of conflict between *dharmas*: these can be seen as conflicts between the traditions of one group and another, which would have been unremarkable at an earlier stage of development, when interaction between groups could be kept at a minimum, but which constitute a problem to be overcome if such groups are to be integrated into a shared cultural system. The story of Ambā (*Mahābhārata* 1.96, 5.170-193) illustrates such a conflict. Bhīṣma forcibly abducts the Kāśī princesses, Ambā and her sisters, an action which, from his cultural perspective, is *dharmic*. Also *dharmic* from his viewpoint is his dismissing Ambā when he finds that she has already been promised to another, Śālva. Interestingly, the *dharmicness* of this

dismissal is only established after debate: this probably indicates the novelty, to Bhīṣma's tribe, of a maiden having a say in the choice of her spouse. Śālva then rejects her since she has already been won by another: this is *dharmic* from *his* cultural perspective. No resolution is found between these *dharmas*, and the unfortunate Ambā bears the consequences until she eventually takes her revenge on Bhīṣma.<sup>31</sup> The text does not condemn the behaviour of any of the characters involved, but we can see this tragedy as a result of the application of old traditions in a new and changed situation: Bhīṣma's abduction of the princesses, though traditionally sanctioned, is already somewhat obsolete, and is bound to cause problems when applied in the context of a different tradition. The *dharma* by which Bhīṣma dismisses Ambā on finding that she was already betrothed seems to belong to a later context than the *dharma* by which he abducted her. The problems here caused by *dharma* are a result of cultural change. An old tribal society has given way to a broader, more cosmopolitan society. Interaction between previously separate groups leads to conflict between their customs and laws: If a new, overarching set of customs and laws evolves as a result, there is still going to be conflict between these new customs and laws and the old ones of any particular subgroup in society. The narrative of the *Mahābhārata* can be seen as a dramatic illustration of the necessity of working to a new set of rules.

The *Mahābhārata*'s political philosophy and its vision of society were new, as the social context which led to them was new. Before this society emerged in the wake of technological change, we cannot really speak of there being 'society' in the way we think of the word. Before society, there were tribes, with very little interaction. There was heavily ritualised giving and receiving of young women,<sup>32</sup> and occasional military assistance given to tribes to whom one's own tribe had given young women. Duryodhana's *kṣatriyadharmā* makes sense in this old context, where thinking only of one's own profit, and that of one's insider group or tribe, was perfectly natural and the acme of responsibility. Morality such as there was was linked to the practicalities of defending and preserving a small gene pool which one could easily identify. In the new, more interactive society, however, Duryodhana and his philosophy must be deemed irresponsible, and so a new morality emerges which is quite different. The new morality must be universalisable. In tribal morality, success in fulfilling *dharma* is shown by

<sup>31</sup> Ambā is reborn as Śikhaṇḍinī, who later changes sex to become Śikhaṇḍin. When faced with this character in battle, Bhīṣma is powerless because he has sworn never to bear arms against a woman or against a man who has been a woman.

<sup>32</sup> The suspicions involved in this process are still visible in Indian dowry customs and the violence that often results.

posterity, it is a traceable genetic success: in new societal morality it is not so traceable. In Indian society, success in fulfilling new types of *dharma* was imaginatively traced in the anticipated rewards or punishments of one's next rebirth.

It is simplistic to introduce such a clean dichotomy between the tribal system and the new society: such a dichotomy is a hermeneutic fiction, and the process of change was presumably far more gradual and spasmodic. Diamond insists that his scheme of four different society types, band, tribe, chiefdom and state, is a digitisation of an analogue process, and he is right to do so. Nonetheless, what I have tried to show is that a textual tradition spanning several of these societal stages must be subject to a great deal of internal reinterpretation. It is interesting, then, that in the *Mahābhārata* this reinterpretation makes use of an old / new society dichotomy: the Epic and the Purāṇas are conscious that *dharma* is no longer what it used to be, and rationalise *dharmic* change in terms of the four *yugas*. Behaviours that were appropriate in one *yuga* are not appropriate in another, and it is in this way that tribal moralities are superceded by the new morality. It is intriguing that there are four *yugas* in the Indian scheme and four society types in Diamond's scheme: it is also interesting that, whilst European ideology would tend to present the movement from one society type to another as 'progress', the Indian schematisation takes the opposite view.

### 3.3. Arjuna's problem: tribal decay

A close look at Arjuna's initial statement of dejection shows that Arjuna does not mention the context of the soul's progress towards *mokṣa*. Nonetheless, his statement is varied, betraying several distinct types of concern. This suggests that perhaps it has been subject to editorial reworking. Since what is under consideration is the likely process of creation of such a massive and polythematic text as the *Mahābhārata*, an attempt may be made to isolate Arjuna's different types of concern from each other, and to ask whether they might belong to different periods or editorial stages of the text's creation, without necessarily making any judgement about the literary or artistic unity of the text as it now stands. Since the order of appropriation of layers into the text may not necessarily correlate with the antiquity of the ideas contained in those accreted layers, it must be noted that the use of 'older' and 'younger' (with inverted commas) refers only to the relative dating of the editorial occasions manifested in supposedly identifiable textual layers.

Arjuna's statement comes in two speeches, 1:28-46 and 2:4-8. This eventuality is immediately suggestive of textual accretion: there seems no reason why Arjuna's qualms should be punctuated by two formulaic verses from Kṛṣṇa (2:2-3) which in no way address his concerns, and moreover 2:5-8 is in a different metre, the irregular *triṣṭubh*. Let us have a look at some specific verses.

[1:31:] I see unfavourable omens. I see no *śreya* through having killed our own folk in battle. [1:32:] I do not want victory, kingdom nor *sukhas*. What is the kingdom to us? What are delights or life? [1:33:] Those for whose sake we want the kingdom, delights and *sukhas*, have stood up in battle, staking life and wealth: [1:34:] teachers, fathers, sons and grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandchildren, brothers-in-law and [other] relatives. [1:35:] I do not want to kill these, though they be killers, even to get the kingdom of the triple world; why then do it for the earth? [1:36:] What joy (*prīti*) may be ours through killing the Dhārtarāṣṭras? Only *pāpa* would join us by having killed these drawn-bowed ones. [1:37:] Therefore we are not allowed to kill the Dhārtarāṣṭras, our own relatives. For how would we be happy (*sukhins*) having killed our own folk? [1:38:] Even if these, their minds spoiled by greed, do not see the *doṣa* caused by tribal decay, and the downfall in treachery to friends, [1:39:] how can we not know to desist from this *pāpa*, discerning the *doṣa* caused by tribal decay? [1:40:] In tribal decay the eternal tribe *dharma*s are lost, and, *dharma* being lost, *adharmā* overcomes the whole tribe.

Jezić (1979:545-546) has established the use of verses beginning '*tasmāt*', usually packed with repeated vocabulary, as end-of-layer markers. Verse 1:37 fits this description, and can therefore be seen as joining two different passages which make up Arjuna's first speech. It seems that the use of the kind of summarising verse that Jezić calls an end-of-layer marker would be occasioned only by the addition of the next layer of text, which is to add some different consideration to the existing text. The *tasmāt* verse, then, although it borrows the terms of the 'older' section and repeats them, is actually part of the 'newer' section. If we then conjecture that the 'newer' section in fact begins at 1:36, and that the verse summarising the first section is in fact the second verse of the second section,<sup>33</sup> the following speculative picture may be sketched.

Section one (1:28-35 and 37)<sup>34</sup> contains straightforward objections, in terms of *śreya* ('that which is preferable') and *sukha* (ease, happiness, often plural: 'feelings of well-being'), to fighting against *svajana* (ones own folk, 'those for the sake of whom kingdom, pleasures and *sukhas* are desired by us') or *svabāndhavas* (relatives).

Section two (1:36 and 38-46) introduces many new terms: *prīti* (joy, gladness) and *pāpa* (mischief, wickedness, which may 'attach to / rest on / join / enter / inhabit us' (1:36c), and which we may 'turn away from' (1:39b)), *kula* (tribe, clan), *kulakṣaya* (tribal decay), *kuladharmā*, *pātaka* (downfall), *doṣa* (evil, guilt), *mahatpāpa* and *naraka*

<sup>33</sup> This analysis allows a greater acknowledgement of Arjuna's dramatic cadence at 1:35, which sets the scene perfectly for Kṛṣṇa's 2:11 and following.

<sup>34</sup> Though added later, verse 37 can be thought of as part of the first section as far as vocabulary is concerned.



(hell). The proliferation of terms suggests the influence of a developed tradition of reflection upon a codified *dharma* and the results of its transgression. This section consists of an elaborate causal chain whereby Arjuna's killing his kinsfolk will lead to the mixing of *varṇas* and the fall of the ancestors. Arjuna revealingly comments '*iti anaśuśrūma*' (1:44d: 'thus we have repeatedly heard').

Section three (2:4-8, Arjuna's second speech) downplays ties of blood and stresses the impropriety of *guru*-slaying in terms of the personal disgrace which would result, a disgrace worse than death (2:6c) and worse than becoming a beggar (2:5b, though whether this refers to a developed tradition of social renunciation for the sake of *mokṣa* is unclear). This last section shows signs of having been influenced by a different codification of *dharma*, less concerned with specifically tribal issues. The envisaged consequences of the act are not post-mortem ones, and are often conceived from a first-person singular perspective.

Arjuna has already been involved, in book five of the *Mahābhārata*, in lengthy theoretical and ethical discussions of the coming war. It has been established that this war is in accordance with *dharma*, that it is being made necessary only because of the despicable behaviour of Duryodhana and his cronies, and that for the Pāṇḍavas not to stand up to them would be dishonourable. When Yudhiṣṭhira asks at 5.151:22, 'how can the obligatory war happen with those who are not to be killed? How can our victory happen by killing *gurus* and elders?', Arjuna dismisses his qualms, suggesting shortly afterwards (5.160:5-8) that Duryodhana has appointed Bhīṣma leader of the Kaurava forces to weaken the Pāṇḍavas' battle resolve, a stratagem which Arjuna swears will be ineffective, declaring 'I shall kill Bhīṣma first'. However, just before the battle is to begin, Arjuna does fall prey to Yudhiṣṭhira's personal and emotional concerns. He is suddenly sure that he would not be able to forgive himself for such an indecent act. Given the guilt that will plague its survivors, the war is not on.<sup>35</sup> He asks Kṛṣṇa, 'how could we be happy having killed our own folk?' (1:37cd). This honest question is the starting point of the *Bhagavadgītā*, and must be kept in view. The problem with the war as initially stated is one of expected existential and psychological trauma, downfall, and the eradication of tribal distinctiveness.

The words *pāpa*, *doṣa* and *pātaka*,<sup>36</sup> which Arjuna chooses to characterise the

<sup>35</sup> For another example of a person tormented in retrospect by their own wicked actions, see *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 7.17:4.

<sup>36</sup> Bodewitz 1999b shows that the term *pātaka* probably originated in the context of chariot racing, when

result of the action he is faced with, do not just refer to the action at hand: they also describe the existential status of its protagonist thereafter. In this, they can be reasonably be translated by the word 'sin', which denotes a metaphysical quality inhering in persons as a result of their actions. For Arjuna, the impending *kulakṣaya* is all the more devastating because he stands to be the prime recipient of the crime. What is the outlook for someone so stained? There are many points of view available in the ancient texts. *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* 3:1 (quoted above, 1.3) says that the knowledge of Indra is enough to neutralise the normal existential consequences of such actions. *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* 1:4 says that the knower of *brahman* passes the existential consequences on to those he or she does not like. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 5.14:8 says that knowledge of the real significance of the Gāyatrī *mantra* neutralises any outstanding existential defilement. At *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.6.1:21, also, knowledge of the significance of certain *yajña* offerings is said to reinstate the sinner into the community benefiting from *yajña*. Kṛṣṇa's viewpoint is essentially the same one: the knowledge that he is offering to Arjuna is the kind that can burn away any bad consequences of actions (4:19). This makes sense, since the analysis of action in terms of *prakṛti*, *svabhāva* and *kāla* leaves no room for personal responsibility. When Kṛṣṇa says that knowledge is the best form of purification (4:38) he is suggesting that other (presumably ritual) forms of existential purification / expiation are unnecessary.

It is interesting that the kind of *mahatpāpa* Arjuna is facing was also faced by his supposed father, Indra, who committed the crime of *brāhmahatya*. Indra, particularly in the Epic and Purāṇic traditions, is fickle and adulterous and reneges on his promises (Dumézil 1970:65-81). Indra gives a brief list of his misdemeanours at *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* 3:1. The story of Indra's sins and their aftermath is told by Śalya at *Mahābhārata* 5.9-18. Indra becomes 'overcome by his own guilt (*svakalmaṣa*)' (5.10:43) and dwells disconsolately in the waters. When he is needed in order to vanquish Nahuṣa, the *devas* discuss his case and Viṣṇu decides he should offer an *aśvamedha*, which would expiate his sins and return him to his former glory. Indra does so: through the wanderings of the sacrificial horse, 'he shared out the *brahmahatya* amongst the trees, rivers, mountains, earth, and women' (5.13:17). He is not yet returned

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passing over a fissure in the earth at speed would capsize one's chariot, and that from this context its usage expanded to denote the failure of any ritual enterprise, only being connected with hell at a later stage when hell became theorised as the post-mortem location of the ritually unobservant. See also Bodewitz 1999a. The use of the term in the *Bhagavadgītā*'s non-ritual context, as part of a tribal ethic, probably indicates the appropriation of *brāhmaṇical* ritual terminology for other purposes: in any case, it is clear that what Arjuna means by the word is not some formal deficiency but a miserable experience.

to glory, however, abiding in diminutive form in a lotus stalk until fortified by flattery and by promises of assistance and co-operation from the *devas*, thus making sure that the sin incurred in killing Nahuṣa will not rest on himself alone. In fact Nahuṣa has fallen already, apparently having lost authority due to his lack of respect for textual and behavioural traditions (this may well refer to the downfall of Buddhist and / or foreign kingdoms). Dumézil (pp. 115-138), ignoring the *aśvamedha*, explores the lotus stalk motif and draws parallels with other mythological traditions concerning the origin of world-sustaining heroes. He attempts to show that this mythologem is concerned not just with heroic origins but with post-battle-sin purifications. However, having cited Armenian, Irish, Kwakiutl and Osset mythology, only the Irish is clearly to do with cleansing rather than origins, and the parallel seems to consist only in the power of water to cool shame and wash stains away.

The distribution of the sin through Indra's *aśvamedha* is echoed in the account Bhīṣma gives of Indra's expiation at *Mahābhārata* 12.273. Here *brahmahatya* is personified and persuaded to leave Indra, residing instead in *agni*, plants, *apsarases* and the waters, thence to be passed on to those who fail to offer to *agni*, those who cut plants for ceremonial reasons, those who have sexual relations with menstruating women, and those who pollute the waters.<sup>37</sup> This account supplements the first one in that the sin is eventually made to reside in those whose behavioural and ritual traditions are frowned on by the text's editors. That this process is connected with *aśvamedha* should not surprise us, since this is a ritual to demonstrate sovereignty, and its successful performance would lead to the establishment of (at least lip service to) the ideology and institutions of its performer. The scapegoat mechanism (Girard 1986) is instantiated here: frictions within the community are minimised by collective demonisation of a third party. This is equivalent to passing sins off on those one does not like (*Kausītaki Upaniṣad* 1:4).

Elsewhere Indra's sin is expiated by *agni* performing a certain ritual on his behalf (*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* 2.134, Oertel 1898:122). Returning to Arjuna's situation, we can observe that, as well as having employed Kṛṣṇa's technique to the best of his ability, partially freeing him from the accumulation of sin, he is also involved in a ritual remedy after the war, Yudhiṣṭhira's *aśvamedha*, which is connected with the Pāṇḍavas' dubious

<sup>37</sup> This kind of sin-distribution is mentioned also in *Atharvaveda* 6.113:2, where a fire-offering accompanied by the correct incantation is said to remove sin (*pāpman*, *durita*) to the smokes, the mists, the fogs, the foams of the rivers, and the embryo-slayers. This last may refer to infanticide amongst certain hunter-gatherer peoples demonised by the *āryas*.

actions (*Mahābhārata* 14.2:12-13, 14.3:3-10), though not as explicitly as Indra's is with his. However, the logistics of Indra's *aśvamedha* and the logistics of Kṛṣṇa's purification-through-knowledge are connected. In the *aśvamedha*, the sin is distributed widely. Likewise in Kṛṣṇa's technique: as we shall see more fully in chapter five, the dissolution of individual agency leaves responsibility with the world as a whole, any number of invisible causal inputs being necessary to produce the output act. If there is blame, then Kṛṣṇa's *jñāna* will de-individualise it, thus dissolving it. The mechanism of purification is the same in both cases, Indra having performed externally what Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to perform internally.

When the *mokṣa* context came into contact with the *brāhmaṇical* ritual, it presented particular problems because the Vedic tradition already had an established but contrasting soteriological scheme. The *Bhagavadgītā*, and with it the Upaniṣads and many other contemporary texts, unites two different post-mortem merit systems (Bodewitz 1997-98:589, 595). The first, the Vedic, is a system of positive merit, caused by correct ritual action (which neutralises potential demerit), and resulting in residence in the heaven of the ancestors, or of Indra. As Gombrich (1975:114) says, 'the *Ṛgveda* consigns the wicked dead to literal or metaphorical obscurity: hell is not mentioned'.<sup>38</sup> The second system is one of negative demerit, caused by action, known as *karmabandha*,<sup>39</sup> and resulting in the continuing ensnarement of the immaterial soul in the material world. There is no positive merit possible in this system, for all stations of rebirth have in common that they are the opposite of not being reborn at all. One does not attain *mokṣa* because one merits it: on the contrary, in the absence of *karmabandha*, *mokṣa* is the perfectly natural state of the soul. Nonetheless, as Kṛṣṇa points out, one may gain comparatively excellent rebirth, this resulting in an extended stay in a glorious heaven, as well as, crucially, a subsequent human birth 'in a house of honest, fortunate folk' or 'in a family (*kula*) of wise *yogins*', where one may once more strive for saving knowledge and freedom from *karmabandha* (6:41-43).

Let us look at the old Vedic view of rebirth. Sons who have sons who have sons (and so on) are required in order to maintain periodic *śrāddha* offerings (of riceball and water, 1:42) to the ancestors in yonder world, who are sustained by them (Kane 1930-

<sup>38</sup> See also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4:4 for a list of post-mortem possibilities (*pitṛ*, *gandharva*, *deva*, *Prajāpati*, *brahman*, or 'some other being') from which hell is conspicuously absent. Hell in the *Bhagavadgītā* seems to denote the results of failing to know and maintain a male bloodline. Such a failure may have only recently become a seriously envisaged possibility.

<sup>39</sup> *Apūrva*, the invisible link between meritorious actions and their personal consequences, is a Vedic

62:IV.334-515). If women become promiscuous, sons will not know who their male ancestors are, and those ancestors will starve. This is *kulakṣaya*, tribal ruin, the end of genetic connection and meaningful kinship.<sup>40</sup> For the ritually observant (the ritual is tribal rather than *brāhmaṇical* here), rebirth occurs in the *pitrloka* and lasts as long as riceball offerings are made by descendants.<sup>41</sup> As soon as one is unsure of the continuing responsibility of one's line after one is deceased, there is the possibility that, having become a *pitr*, one will starve.<sup>42</sup> This idea of *punarmṛtyu* (death-again) was also invoked when ritual merit was envisaged as a quantity, earned in life and spent in the afterlife.<sup>43</sup> This situation would only arise in the wake of anxiety about the future continuity and ritual rectitude of one's bloodline. The ideologies here invoked seem to represent a halfway point of development: tribes have, with *brāhmaṇical* assistance, begun to socialise, but one of the results of this is a highly protective attitude to genetic continuity. In this context the *pitrloka* and the *śrāddha* offerings become important: previously, the continuity of the ancestral line would have been indistinguishable from the present survival of the tribe.

Once anxiety over genetic continuity had arisen, there was an entry for the idea of avoiding the system of ritual merit, usually through knowledge of it and of the context in which it was thought to operate. Elaborate rituals were devised (knowledge of whose meaning was an essential part of their correct performance) to ward off the prospect of *punarmṛtyu* (Rodhe 1946:81-105, Tull 1989:54-119): one's residence in the hereafter would then be endless, but, since *śrāddha* food to sustain the heavenly body was no longer to be counted on, this idea underwent modification and was soon presented as

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version of *karmabandha*, giving it a positive spin.

<sup>40</sup> *Kulakṣaya* also means that the primary motivation for having children (*i.e.* to maintain *kula* and *pitṛs*) is lost: the passage to the renunciative ideology is thus easy to explain, being first and foremost the renunciation of parenthood.

<sup>41</sup> Residence in the *pitrloka* does not begin with birth and childhood as on earth, but nonetheless the point is clear.

<sup>42</sup> See *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.9.3:12, in which death in yonder world is due to the lack of a son to perform ritual. The idea that one's heavenly sojourn could expire may have been connected to the observation of shooting 'stars' or the disappearance of stars: see below, footnote 54.

<sup>43</sup> At *Mahābhārata* 3.191 Indradyumna falls from heaven because no one remembers his fame. A search is made of various animals, and a tortoise is found who remembers him, returning him aloft. There appears to be some confusion over what keeps one aloft in one's post-mortem *loka*: is it the *apūrva* merit of one's ritual actions, the riceball *śrāddhas* of one's descendants, or the memory of surviving folk? All these lines converge if we remember that having sons who have sons who have son *etc.* is the axiomatic ritual action, and as such always remains uncompleted, being contingent upon future events. Once the possibility of disaster is contemplated, insecurity is irrefutable, and heaven dwelling becomes quantifiable. The animals in the story probably represent different tribes (Chattopadhyaya 1959): it seems that Indradyumna's direct father-son line has been broken but that he is still represented by an allied tribe.

‘becoming *brahman*’, or ‘going to *mokṣa*’.<sup>44</sup> In the original scheme the person has two lives, one here, one hereafter. It is important to envisage the initial system undisturbed, before economic or agricultural innovations, before anxiety over bloodline integrity was introduced by population growth and interaction: the *kula* remains at a stable population, with no intake of genes from outside the *kula* except as imported via women who remain non-adulterous. In this situation, the power of the ancestors is continuously appropriated for the well-being of the *kula*. New generations thrive because of connection with the paragenational pattern: it is easy to imagine the recycling of souls within the tribe, the *dehin* beginning, with no prior *karmabandha*, with a new person after the old person has been deposited into the safe category of *pitṛ*.<sup>45</sup> People from outside the *kula* are not really people.<sup>46</sup> But if populations rise, people have to rub along with different others, and folk from other *kulas* have to be accepted into the same ontological category as oneself. The wider society causing this shift also leads to adultery, miscegenation, the abandonment or alteration of ancient ritual practices, and breakdown or dishonesty in the *śrāddha* system. This means that the *pitṛloka* system, the antithesis of cosmopolitanism, has failed, for any male now has reason to fear that his great-grandchildren will not know who their great-grandfather is and thus will neglect to feed him with *śrāddha*. Crucially, the failure of the *pitṛloka* idea to exhaust rebirth leaves manifold inequalities of birth and fortune requiring explanation. If a soul may escape from the *kula* it has always been part of, then any person’s soul may have previously been in a person of a different *kula*.<sup>47</sup> In the same way as gradations of ritual,

<sup>44</sup> See Bodewitz 1996, which shows that the idea of *punarmṛtyu* originally denoted final annihilation, without rebirth back on earth as at *Bhagavadgītā* 9:21. The term *punarmṛtyu*, which ‘is only found in rather late Vedic texts’ (p. 28), thus seems to mark an interim stage between the old Vedic / tribal soteriology and the *mokṣa* soteriology.

<sup>45</sup> Bodewitz 1994 notes that the early layers of the *Rgveda* do not mention the *pitṛloka* or the great forefathers, and that originally the dead were thought to reside in some gloomy underworld irrespective of their deeds when alive. He explains the origin of heavens and hells in terms of encouragement for *brāhmanical* ritual activity. The ancient invisibility of the *pitṛloka* is to be expected: it is only through socialisation with other *kulas* that one’s own forefathers would have been lauded. The xenophobic instinct would have resulted, in the initial phase of socialisation, in an explosion of kinship partisanship which, when heavenly *lokas* were hypothesised as rewards for *brāhmanical* ritual propriety, would have led to extravagant claims concerning the location of one’s own ancestors.

<sup>46</sup> This point may be illustrated by innumerable ancient examples of cruelty to women taken from outside the tribe. Insofar as this *pitṛ* system, predicated on the anxiety of paternity, may have been interrupted by population density only in the most recent small fraction of the lifespan of our species, its instincts remain, and examples of such cruelty to women are still easy to find. Sian Hawthorne has suggested to me (personal communication, 2001) that the *pitṛ* system was replaced by textual authorship, a symbolic guarantee of paternity: writing follows swiftly upon the loss of *kula* integrity.

<sup>47</sup> This is *varṇasaṃkara*, an existential crisis which would have been widely feared (and indeed still is) by any number of tribes now interacting. In this crisis, it is no longer possible for anyone to know who they are, certainly not in the way in which they would have known such a thing when humans were separated into discrete genetic traditions. Such genetic mixing must be carefully regulated. *Manusmṛti* 3:9 bans a man from marrying a woman ‘named after a constellation, a tree, a river, or with a low-caste

heroic and procreative human action could explain differentials of *pitṛloka* experience, so could such gradations explain differentials of human experience. At this point, one may discard the *pitṛloka* system, or whatever *mātrloka* or other ancestral systems there may have been, and think in terms of immediate rebirth in some human social station. Or one may retain them all as possible stations of rebirth.

There is thus a smooth passage from the initial disruption of tribal continuity to the ideas of reincarnation according to *karmabandha*. Reincarnation, in the form of a recycling of the basic element of special life (the 'soul' in the later caricature), had, after all, been part of the system all along. The idea that, after death, an essence of the person must be reappropriated for the continuing prosperity of the tribe, is a common motif in ethnographies ancient and modern.<sup>48</sup> But, in the old tribal scheme, personhood only lasted for one-and-a-bit lives before dissolving into posterity. At some point the idea that one's heavenly days were numbered caused the destiny of the individual to be extended into an enormous number of possible successive lives. Then the natural question is whether this enormous number might be finite, and, if so, what is so special about the last life, and the *mokṣa* soteriology follows. Held (1935:127ff.) believes these developments to have been a result of the disruption of clan continuity and the attendant speculation over who one's ancestors were. This suggestion of Held's is extremely valuable: it is far more satisfactory to explain the rise of reincarnatory ideology on the basis of known historical developments causing an adjustment to existing ideas, than it is to hypothesise the influence of aboriginal ideas, hitherto undocumented, on the tradition of the Āryan invaders, as many have done (Zimmer 1952:281, 378-380, Santana 1989, Gough 1903:25, Pande 1957:280-285, Jaini 1980:218).<sup>49</sup> The process of change to the new scheme, however, was never completed: O'Flaherty (1980:13) notes that 'when the theory of transmigration came to be accepted in India (whatever its

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name, or named after a mountain, or with a partisan or servile or frightening name': these names denote tribes who are beyond the pale. Genetic stock was carefully preserved: a man's marriage should always be with someone of the same *varṇa* or higher, and children born contrary to this were outcaste. The highest *varṇa* is therefore the one that preserves pedigree to the largest extent: see *Manusmṛti* 10. The *varṇa* system can be seen as a means of preserving the possibility of really 'knowing who (or what) you are', if only for a few. The concentration on *male* ancestors suggests that it was men who sought this possibility in this way.

<sup>48</sup> See Bloch and Parry 1982:7-9, 211-230. Woodburn 1982, studying various hunter-gatherer peoples who are exceptions to this rule, suggests that the recycling of the soul-stuff of the dead back into the tribe by means of elaborate funerary rites is characteristic of 'delayed-return' rather than 'immediate-return' economies. The *pitṛloka* scheme may thus be linked to pastoralism and agriculture, whose lessons of selective breeding could have been the origin of the preoccupation with paternity.

<sup>49</sup> The tendency to dichotomise Āryan and indigenous ideas has diminished as racism has become less fashionable. Of course any newly complex society would involve a sharing of mythologies, but in an important sense all of these would now be obsolete.

source), it was superimposed upon the old system without superceding it; thus the substance-code of *karma* mediates between two different, contradictory theories'.<sup>50</sup> These contradictions necessitated some ingenious speculation, in many different textual genres, about the exact process of death and rebirth, and a whole host of metaphysical *ātman*-theories. The individual bound soul seeking *mokṣa* was an adaptation of a more abstract life-force which was ritually recycled in the old tribal system, coming to each human person as a blank slate. This idea of non-individual subjectness, the philosophical *dehin* mentioned earlier, is chronologically prior to the transmigrating, *mokṣa*-seeking soul, and is altogether a more coherent idea. To be fully understood, it must be seen in the context of a tribe with unbroken ancestral tradition, and in the context of the ritual care with which the members of the tribe protect its genetic continuity. This philosophical *dehin*, non-individuated subjectness, only exists, after all, as long as that genetic continuity is maintained: where tribal interaction is rare, highly ritualised, and fraught with extreme danger of pollution,<sup>51</sup> the precious subjectness is not thought of in relation to individuals of other tribes, and is specific to, or the mark of, genetic continuity. In the same way, in our advanced state of *varṇasamkara*, the notion of humanity, the experience of being a human person, has been set up as an ontological category marking 'us' off from all other species, which, on the Abrahamic view, simply do not have souls. It is difficult fully to imagine the ancient scenario from a modern European perspective: one's attempt becomes flooded with humanistic abhorrence. Notions of *dehin* grew from the quintessence of proper life recycled within a stable tribal system, but this idea changed dramatically in ancient India, and the texts then make use of a soteriologically active entity which has more in common with the Abrahamic soul.<sup>52</sup> Having traced a plausible genesis of this soul idea in a primeval, non-individual subjectness, we must not lose sight of the original idea in our reading of the *Bhagavadgītā*. This philosophical *dehin* is an integral theoretical part of 2:11-30,

<sup>50</sup> See also Rodhe 1946:122. Discussing the Upaniṣads, he notes that the 'idea of a rebirth to this world is combined with the ideas of the other kinds of rebirth and with those of *karman*. No definite synthesis is reached. Various ideas appear side by side'.

<sup>51</sup> Migrating tribes may have found themselves in situations where no arrangements existed with neighbouring tribes. Parpola 2001 explores suggestions of incest within proud migrating warrior-families: indeed, inbreeding may be hypothesised as a cause of the health problems within the *Mahābhārata*'s royal family tree, as well as an explanation of its many far fetched stories of divine parentage.

<sup>52</sup> Werner's cautions against the use of an Abrahamic idea of 'soul' to understand ancient Indian texts are thus only partly to the point. If the context is soteriological / ideological rather than philosophical, 'soul', a word whose contemporary usage is impressionistic and far removed from the contexts in which it demanded a precise definition, would be a fine translation. The problem with ancient Indian texts is that it is not easy to tell the two types of context apart: Werner, perhaps assuming that certain terminology automatically denotes a philosophical context, is oversimplifying.



Kṛṣṇa's first serious response to Arjuna's statement, which outlines the methodological basis of *asakta karman*, ending 'therefore you ought not to grieve for any creature' without having once mentioned the *mokṣa* context.<sup>53</sup>

The *Bhagavadgītā* unites the two systems by making it explicit that the traditional heavens for Vedic sacrificers are a part of material existence, a station of rebirth like any other: they are only enjoyed until one's ritual merit is exhausted, and then one is reborn elsewhere (9:20-21). *Naraka*, feared by Arjuna at 2:40-44 as tribal extinction, elsewhere (16:7-16) comes under the influence of the expanding religious cosmology and is considered a plane of rebirth visited upon severe offenders against *dharma*.

The most famous presentation of the coexistence of the tribal and *mokṣa* schemes is that of the two paths, *pitryāna* and *devayāna* (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10, *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2:15-16, *Praśna Upaniṣad* 1:9-10, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2:7-11, *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad* 1.2, *Bhagavadgītā* 8:23-26).<sup>54</sup> One path is the *pitryāna*, leading to *pitṛloka* and then back to earth (this last being an innovation): the other is the *devayāna*, leading to *brahman*.<sup>55</sup> In all the Upaniṣadic versions except that of the *Kauṣītakī*, the people on the *pitryāna* are further distinguished from those on the *devayāna* by their earthly behaviour, the former being characterised by their belief in the efficacy of offerings to gods and gifts to priests, and (in the *Praśna* version) by their desire for children, the latter by their dwelling austere and chastely in the wilderness and by their pursuit and possession of special knowledge. These passages clearly show the renunciative implications of the *mokṣa* soteriology and the threat it poses to *brāhmaṇical* ritualism. There is debate within the Upaniṣads about these implications: *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* is particularly scathing about those who perform rituals, but is countered by *Īśā Upaniṣad*, which criticises renunciation (Barua 1921). The

<sup>53</sup> *Amṛta* at 2:15 probably refers to immortality in the *pitṛloka*: this idea would easily morph into that of *mokṣa*, which, as we have seen, is easily conceived as a never-ending, highly subtle embodiment.

<sup>54</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā*'s account contains the apparently shocking revelation that dying at night or during the latter half of the solar year is enough to ensure rebirth even for those who know *brahman*. This is the reason why Bhīṣma, though mortally wounded in the war, waits until after the winter solstice to give up his life. The astronomical stipulation, though at odds with the spirit of the *karmayoga*, reminds us that the heavenly *lokas* are represented by the night sky and *mokṣa* by the sun: see Hildebeitel 2001 for interesting explorations on this point. It is intriguing that the year's 'night' is the period between the summer and winter solstices rather than that between the vernal and autumnal equinoxes.

<sup>55</sup> In the *Chāndogya* version, a third possibility, of being reborn as 'these tiny, repeatedly revolving creatures', is redolent of the *nitya nigūḍha*, the inexhaustible reservoir of souls in the lowest level of plant existence which, in Jainism, allows the universe to be an eternal process despite being continuously depleted through the loss of perfected and cleansed souls. See P. S. Jaini 1980. The depletion of the world's soul-stuff is a problem for the *mokṣa* soteriology. In the tribal system it was envisaged in existential terms as *kulakṣaya*.

*Bhagavadgītā* adopts the *mokṣa* soteriology but strips it of its renunciative implications by introducing *asakta karman*, the technique of acting without generating *karmabandha*. This idea seems to be the ritual's only hope, and is suggested at *Īśā Upaniṣad* 2: 'one should want to live a hundred years just performing works in the world. It is thus, not in any other way, [that] action does not stain you, a person'. Kṛṣṇa expounds his technique at length and with passion, not just for narrative reasons, because from a dramatic viewpoint the war is crucial and the Pāṇḍavas rely on Arjuna, but also for socio-historical reasons, because the text's editors sought to show that action as such is harmless and ought to be performed. In the narrative context, Arjuna, to be a good *kṣatriya*,<sup>56</sup> needs a technique with which to discharge his responsibility notwithstanding incidental personal scruples: the *kṣatra* is inherently active and decisive, and such a technique would have been required as soon as there was a class of people dedicated to physical defence of the organisation of society.<sup>57</sup> In the socio-historical context, renunciation threatened *brāhmaṇical* ritual institutions. In the text, Kṛṣṇa's technique of *asakta karman* applies to both contexts. The first (*kṣatriya*) context uses the philosophy of *dehin*, and is older than the second (*brāhmaṇical*), which uses the soteriology of the soul.

As has been shown above, Arjuna's initial statement of his refusal to fight contains three fragments, in none of which does he complain that to fight would retard his progress towards *mokṣa*. This suggests that early versions of the text were not informed by the full force of the fashion for renunciation. The alternative hypothesis, that the narrative moment of the lily-livered warrior was devised as a vehicle for promulgating the orthoprax ideological response to the renouncers' objections to ritual action, seems unlikely. Certainly, as regards Arjuna's practical question 'how could we be happy having killed our own people?', Kṛṣṇa's answer is detailed and to the point. The various traumas which Arjuna envisages are not necessary consequences of the action of killing his relatives. A warrior, having ascertained the propriety of a military enterprise, may apply himself wholeheartedly to the task, and overcome his personal scruples by dedicating himself to a higher social agenda. Many necessary actions are

<sup>56</sup> Good, that is, under a new post-Duryodhana rubric. This is not critical to the necessity of an attitudinal martial technique, but does affect the *Bhagavadgītā*'s presentation of *this* technique.

<sup>57</sup> B. K. Smith (1994:29) says that '*brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas* and commoners are who they are in part because of the abstract and neuter powers that enliven and animate each class. These powers I call the 'elemental qualities' of the *varṇa* system; they are the *brahman*, the *kṣatra* and the *viś*'. Smith thinks that these 'elemental qualities' reflect an Indo-European triad of social ideology, to which was added, to make the *varṇa* system, a fourth category of all who fall outside the triad and so are not really any proper part of society.

distasteful, and, rather than dwelling upon this, Arjuna may maximise the efficiency of his necessary actions, and minimise the resulting emotional discomfort, by ignoring his own personal emotional response and concentrating fully on the job in hand. Such a technique could have been most urgently required in military contexts, where not only is the action most distasteful whoever one's opponents are, but also the stakes are very high, hence there is an acute need for maximum efficiency. In a period of socio-political change and centralisation of power, the large armies and terrible slaughter reflected in the *Mahābhārata* may have been a recent and disturbing reality.

Kṛṣṇa's technique is not simple. It involves a complete rethinking of the normal human approach to action and as such is a martial art, having much in common with the surviving oriental martial arts, all of which are psychological and philosophical as well as physical (see above, 1.3). It is critical that the motive for action transcends personal considerations, instead being the protection of the community from evil forces. The actor is in a position to apply Kṛṣṇa's technique only if there is a lofty scheme legitimating the action, and thus failure would be an honourable failure. In the case of actions which spring just from the motivation of what one personally stands to gain from their success, failure makes one feel foolish, and preoccupation with this possibility will hamper one's technique. Hence Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to 'perform actions... having abandoned attachment, having become equal to success or failure' (2:48). He deplores actions which are motivated by desire for personal gain, and introduces a variety of alternative motivational ideas: for the good of society, for the maintenance of the cosmos, for the love of God. Only by acting on the basis of these external motivators will a person be able to maintain peace of mind.

Kṛṣṇa is able to back up this claim by explaining that, in fact, all action is externally determined, and that the impression of human agency is a delusion (see chapter five below). It is only under the influence of this delusion that people become attached to the results of their actions, causing suffering in this life, where hazard is a fact. The deconstruction of the 'I' as agent works by pointing out that the acting person, the physically separate human being, is no more than a temporary agglomeration of shifting external forces. If there is an 'I', it cannot be identified through analysis of action, since the causes and the results of action are external to it. It is therefore quite a strain to maintain the ego's conceit of being at once the agent and the witness of action. The guilt envisaged by Arjuna is an example of this strain. Not realising that he is bound to act out whatever reflects his externally given *svabhāva*, *ahaṃkāra* has led him

to imagine the personal consequences of an action which is not really 'his', and thus to have a negative attitude to what is going to happen anyway.<sup>58</sup> This realisation, that only *prakṛti* acts, and that one is bound to do what one does whether or not this causes (or is imagined as causing) *kulakṣaya* or anything else, is a prerequisite of *asakta karman*, which follows immediately upon it.

The foregoing three paragraphs constitute a fairly complete account of Kṛṣṇa's technique of *asakta karman*. In this account, which answers Arjuna's statement fairly well (excepting his particular fears for the future well-being of his *kula*),<sup>59</sup> the result of *asakta karman* is peace of mind and successful action. *Mokṣa* and transmigration are not mentioned, nor need they be. The technique is based on an empirical philosophy of human action, a philosophy whose empiricism extends even to the psychological realm. This non-*mokṣa* philosophy and technique can only be clearly discerned in the *Bhagavadgītā* by missing out many verses, and by sidestepping the *Vedāntic* interpretations that have been given since medieval times and even within the *Mahābhārata* itself (in the *Anugītā*, for example).

### 3.4. Soteriological interference and the logical primacy of *sukha*

The relevance of the notion of being bound by action in the *Bhagavadgītā* is by no means limited to the context of *mokṣa*. Indeed, the whole episode only occurs because Arjuna is worried about being bound, in an immediate, psychological and existential sense, by the murderous action with which he is faced. If the interpretive notion of the 'bondage of action' is widened beyond the text's *samsāra*-oriented use of the term *karmabandha*, it may constitute a central tool for the literary analysis of the received

<sup>58</sup> 18:59-60: 'If, having had recourse to *aḥaṃkāra*, you think 'I will not fight!', this, your resolution, is wrong: *prakṛti* will impel you. Bound by your own action, born of *svabhāva*, you will do, though unwisely, that which, from confusion, you do not want to do'. This could be thought of as a kind of *karmabandha* (action-bond): once there is birth, *dehin*, because embodied, is bound to (witness) action. Kṛṣṇa uses the root 'bind' (Sanskrit *bandh*) in this way at 18:60c: Arjuna is *nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā*, bound by his own (future) action. Elsewhere *karmabandha* denotes that which causes birth in the first place.

<sup>59</sup> Arjuna's *kula*-centric fears are, by implication, glossed as personal by the text, and provide an example of a *sakta* attitude. This is alarming, since the mixed social community that the new ideology holds up is, in its super-personal character, an adapted version of the tribal community: if tribal interests represent attachment then how can societal ones not do so? This is to anticipate the next chapter. Here it will suffice to say that Kṛṣṇa's ignoring Arjuna's tribal perspective is historically apposite: in the context of dense population, it was the violence resulting from this perspective that caused its downfall, irrespective of how experientially unacceptable its replacement was in comparison. Nonetheless, as this thesis will bear out, in the long run it does the text no good to interpret Arjuna's problem: the problem as Arjuna states it might be historically unanswerable, but the problem as the text understands it is philosophically unanswerable.

text, as well as a useful clue to the prehistory of the renouncers' aversion to action.

*Karmabandha* in the context of *mokṣa*, and the trauma which Arjuna fears and which is his reason for not fighting, are not very well distinguished in the *Bhagavadgītā*. A literary reason could be given for this: they do not need to be, for most of the text is taken up with Kṛṣṇa describing a certain *yogic* technique of action. If adopted, this technique puts paid to the 'bondage of action' in the context of *mokṣa* as well as in those contexts Arjuna initially invokes. When the *mokṣa* context is introduced, *asakta karman* will still lead to peace of mind and maintenance of *kula* and the ancestors (insofar as this is possible in the new society), but in addition will ensure that the soul is not reborn.

Kṛṣṇa's argument has the feeling of novelty: he repeats and emphasises the possibility of action without staining the soul, as if he is the first to have discovered it. He augments this possibility with a metaphysical attention to the acting and transmigrating entities, and to the origin and cause of the world.<sup>60</sup> Kṛṣṇa reinterprets the *bandha* of *karmabandha* such that it would be better called *buddhibandha* or *ahamkārabandha*, since it is not *karman* as such which binds. Buddhism shares this reinterpretation, seeing the causes of rebirth as mental rather than physical,<sup>61</sup> but its reinterpretation is more dramatic, since even rebirth itself is mental.<sup>62</sup> Both Buddhism and the *Bhagavadgītā* came to this view through analysis of ideas of selfhood and agency. The *Bhagavadgītā* also came to it through distaste for the social consequences of the contrary view.

The sequel to Kṛṣṇa's tweaking of the *mokṣa* soteriology is that the post-mortem progress of the soul is unaffected by the visible aspect of actions undertaken. As such, the Upaniṣadic identification of the *devayānins* with those who dwell in the wilderness, uninvolved in social rituals (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2:15-16), is impossible for the *Bhagavadgītā*, whose version of the two post-mortem paths (8:23-26) characterises both groups as *yogins*, additionally calling those who do

<sup>60</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā* probably represents the earliest conjunction of a theistic idea of creation with the *mokṣa* context: Buddhism and Jainism remained atheistic with respect to creation.

<sup>61</sup> See *Dhammapada* 1:1-2, quoted above, 2.2.

<sup>62</sup> Buddhism's focus is on consciousness-moments rather than on substance: the *x* suggested by consciousness-of-*x* is secondary to the event of consciousness that it is invoked to explain. What is important in consciousness-of-*x* is whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Buddhism, by refusing to have a realist ontology, establishes a congruence between the (mental) causes of *karmabandha* and its (mental) effects. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, *karmabandha* has mental causes and physical effects. Bronkhorst (2000) discusses the problems of this view, which threaten the compatibility of *karmabandha* and realist ontology.

not return *brahman*-knowers, but, crucially, makes no reference to visible differences in lifestyle. The mentalism of Kṛṣṇa's theory logically dissolves any behavioural dualism of religious paths. However, it would seem that, by the time the *Bhagavadgītā* made this step, a behavioural dualism was already entrenched, as is shown by the *Bhagavadgītā*'s measured respect for known *yogic* practises, when in fact *any* practice is potentially *yogic*. The pervasiveness of this dualism is also visible in Hinduism's acceptance of renunciatory phases of life before and after a phase of social and ritual responsibility (Olivelle 1993), as well as in Buddhism's maintenance of an institutionalised monkhood with all the trappings of asceticism.

When, in the course of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s expansion, the *saṃsāra / mokṣa* context was overlaid onto Kṛṣṇa's exposition of *asakta karman*, it fitted very well indeed. Arjuna's threat, to renounce a socially responsible action because of individual consequences, was parallel to the threat to orthopraxy (especially *brāhmanical* orthopraxy) from the renunciative ideology of the new *mokṣa*-seekers. Moreover, the consequence following from adoption of Kṛṣṇa's technique (peace of mind) was easily extended beyond death, in the new context, to include *mokṣa*. Thus *asakta karman*, Kṛṣṇa's *yogic* approach to action, is a unifying theme in the text: focusing on this theme can subvert the problems caused by the text's ideological and chronological diversity. Early versions of the text presented this theme and gave an exposition from one viewpoint, and subsequent textual layers have re-presented the same theme understood and fleshed out according to the problems, preoccupations and religious outlook of different times and different milieus.

In each of the following soteriological pairs treated by the *Bhagavadgītā*, *asakta karman* leads to the first item rather than the second: *sukha / duḥkha*, maintenance of orderly society / chaos and *varṇasaṃkara, mokṣa / punarjanman*. Because of *asakta karman*'s multivalency, it is sometimes hard to know which pair is under consideration in any particular passage. For example, the text contains numerous references to the glorious state attained by *asakta karmins*. These references are extremely varied: some are describing an individual psychological state, others a socio-existential state, others an obscure disembodied one, but often they are highly ambiguous descriptions. This ambiguity means that the readers or hearers of the text are able to interpret most of these references from whichever soteriological context suits them. This can partly explain the popularity and literary success of the text. It is popular in Hinduism due to interpretations from the *saṃsāra* context, but its openness to interpretations from the

*sukha* context means that it has also been accessible to other cultures: a person who does not believe in reincarnation or much else may still profit from some advice on how to be happy. However, this eventuality is interesting in itself. The *sukha / duḥkha* context does much more than provide a convenient bridge between tribal soteriology and *mokṣa* soteriology. Both of these soteriologies depend on metaphysical ideologies, that is, they are artefacts created by people, but the *sukha / duḥkha* context, as a simple barometer of individual psychological health, seems to be a phenomenological given. An instinctive soteriology of peace of mind is the basis of the other soteriologies. The *sukha / duḥkha* context of *asakta karman* is logically, phenomenologically, chronologically and, as we shall see, linguistically prior to the other contexts.

In parts of the text it is easy to distinguish the immediate result of viewing things in the light of what Kṛṣṇa says, from the eventual result of acting in the way he suggests. The immediate result is presented as *na anuśocitum arhasi* (2:25, 26, 27 and 30: 'you should not grieve'). The eventual result is initially presented at 2:32 in terms of Arjuna attaining *svarga*, that is, long-term fame on earth and / or a hero's *loka*. Very quickly, however, Kṛṣṇa extrapolates from the specific results for Arjuna of this war performed in a certain manner, to the general results for anyone of their allotted actions performed in this manner, and speaks in terms of the avoidance of rebirth. In doing this, he moves his focus from Arjuna's war action to any action. The result of *asakta karman* is given as *siddhi*,<sup>63</sup> *para, para gati*,<sup>64</sup> *sthāna*,<sup>65</sup> *pada, avyaya pada*,<sup>66</sup> *śreya*, and *niḥśreya*,<sup>67</sup> as *brahma* (neuter), *brahmabhūya*, *brahmasaṃsparśa*, *brahmanirvāṇa*,<sup>68</sup> *akalmaṣa*<sup>69</sup> and *amṛta*.<sup>70</sup> Sometimes the description is psychological: *prasāda*, *sānti*, freedom from *pāpa* and *aśubha*, *sukha akṣaya / uttama / ātyantika / atyanta*.<sup>71</sup> At 4:10, and increasingly from chapter six onwards, the result of *asakta karman* is becoming one

<sup>63</sup> 3:4, 20, 12:10, 14:1: success.

<sup>64</sup> 3:19, 13:34: the other, supreme, highest. With *gati* at 6:45, 9:32, 13:28, 16:22: the other / highest course.

<sup>65</sup> 9:18, 18:62: stability.

<sup>66</sup> 15:4: the station. With *avyaya* at 15:5: the imperishable station.

<sup>67</sup> 3:2, 11: the preferable. With *niḥ* at 5:2: the unbettered.

<sup>68</sup> 4:24, 31, 5:6, 6:27, 8:24, 13:30, 18:50: the absolute (neuter gender). With *bhūya* at 14:26, 18:53: becoming the absolute. With *saṃsparśa* at 6:28: contact with the absolute. With *nirvāṇa* at 2:72, 5:24: the absolute-with-extinguishing (of phenomena).

<sup>69</sup> 4:30, 6:27: stainlessness.

<sup>70</sup> 2:15, 14:20: deathlessness.

<sup>71</sup> Serenity (2:64-71), peace (4:39, 5:12, 29, 12:12, 18:62), freedom from evil (10:3) and harm (4:16, 9:1), indestructible (5:21) or ultimate (6:27) or endless (6:21, 28) happiness.

with Kṛṣṇa, who as such is *paramaṃ puruṣaṃ divyam* ('utmost divine person', 8:8c), *kaviṃ purāṇam anuśāsītāra* ('ancient ruling poet-sage', 8:9a), and *yeṇa sarvaṃ idaṃ tatam* ('by whom all this is extended', 8:22d). The text's descriptions of the goal of *asakta karman* are presented in various metres, and informed by gnostic perspectives (2:12-30, 13:12-23, 15:11)<sup>72</sup> as well as theistic ones. It is noteworthy that the gnostic perspective explicitly includes the immediate psychological results of *asakta karman*, and is presented using occasional *triṣṭubh* verses, some of which occur also in the Upaniṣads (Jezic 1997).

Agrawal (1982:20) points out that in the absence of empirical proof of the Hindu metaphysical scheme of transmigration, the efficacy of a philosophy such as Kṛṣṇa's is still verifiable in terms of its psychological effects in the present life. This is consonant with the text's initially psychological reading of action's bondage, and also with the narrative context, which requires principally that Arjuna be made to fight wholeheartedly and without fear. It is clear that, from a literary viewpoint, it is not possible to impose a single hermeneutical scheme on Kṛṣṇa's words. Under a *mokṣa* interpretation, the psychological terminology of some of the references to the goal must be seen as metaphorical. Under a psychological interpretation, the transcendental terminology of some of the other references must be seen as figurative, emphasising the truly radical nature of Kṛṣṇa's approach to action. Once the text is recognised as composite, both interpretations may be used side by side, and thus a more literal and exact understanding may be gained of the Sanskrit words used. The text's problem of action is not just about Arjuna's peace of mind, nor is it just about the disentanglement of the soul from *samsāra*.

The reputation of the *Bhagavadgītā* rests on the literary result of the historical accident that *asakta karman*, a method suggested in response to Arjuna's natural dismay, also fitted as a defence of action in the context of *karmabandha* and *mokṣa*. This accidental fit is eased because the psychological language of *sukha*, which is integral to Arjuna's plight regardless of any post-mortem existence, can also do duty by referring to *mokṣa* or to the continued sustenance of the *pitṛs*. Howsoever superhuman the goal striven for, the language of human goals is useful for its description. Hence, as remarked earlier, the strange dual use of the pronouns *saḥ* and *ātman* to refer at one and

<sup>72</sup> These gnostic perspectives downplay the activism of Kṛṣṇa's philosophy and centre on the knowledge of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, which in the *Bhagavadgītā* necessarily results in *asakta karman*



the same time to a human person and to a recipient of eternal disembodied existence.<sup>73</sup> Now, it might be pointed out that such language is all that is available, and that it only describes metaphorically and by intimation in this latter case. This is true, to be sure, but is not quite to the point, which is that this constraint is there not just in the case of word use but also in the case of all selfconscious ideation. If *mokṣa* can only be described in psychological terms then how can it be claimed that it is a non-psychological state, or that anyone has ever managed to think of it as such? This is why it is so important to establish a mundane context for Arjuna, with *asakta karman* serving to treat only his guilt, as a chronological precursor to the *mokṣa* context. Not only is such a context historically likely on the basis of other textual evidence, and not only does it show itself clearly in Arjuna's initial statement which the *Bhagavadgītā* cannot do without, but also this mundane context is the *logical* precursor and backdrop of all human striving. Arjuna states (1:32-37) that striving for wealth and kingdom is subordinate to striving for peace of mind, a model which is then extrapolated by Kṛṣṇa beyond death towards a state *like* peace of mind, only better. After all, the model which the *mokṣa* soteriology uses is almost all there in the mundane context: there is a mysterious but unquestionably desirable state (*sukha*) which, through experience,<sup>74</sup> is known to be inversely related to the deliberate possession of conventionally desirable things (kingdom, wealth). The only thing really added by the *saṃsāra* context is the extension of the timescale and the resulting irrelevance of death to the striving entity.<sup>75</sup> If the course is extended far beyond death, the long-term lessons of experience, so vital to the striver, are only available through those who have knowledge of past lives. If *karmabandha* is said to link past actions to present conditions and present actions to future conditions in certain specific ways, a sensible question to ask is: who says, and how do they know? In ancient India such knowledge was said to be possessed by *ṛṣis*. Whatever behavioural norms were encouraged by their utterances through the idea of post-mortem retribution, and whatever attitudes or activities (or absence thereof) were encouraged through the idea of becoming free of *karmabandha*, the whole ideology of *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa*

<sup>73</sup> Grammatically, a pronoun 'stands for' a noun. In the case of human experience, the noun would be the name of a person. In the case of *mokṣa*, this name is obsolete and inapplicable, but no other noun suggests itself. Perhaps it is impossible for any human language to have an appropriate noun here.

<sup>74</sup> Arjuna's experience of the consequences of his previous actions enables him to hypothesise his own future misery as a consequence of *this* action. This ability to learn from experience, that is, to conceive of one's experience as at least partly determined by one's actions, seems to be possessed by differing creatures in differing amounts.

<sup>75</sup> See above, section one, for a discussion of the intelligibility problems that result from extrapolating from the lifespan of a person, ending at death, to the lifespan of a soul which never dies but which, after *mokṣa*, nothing ever happens to again.

depends on the authority of an elite. Furthermore, the ideology is such that it facilitates the authorial / authoritative elite in the assertion and / or maintenance of their authority in other matters. Now, this does not mean that the ideology is not a straightforward description of the way things are: it does, however, mean that it may well not be.

In this way, the fit between the technique for *sukha* and the technique for *mokṣa*, which interestingly is not commented upon in the ancient texts, is in fact highly significant. It calls to mind Feuerbach's theology and the tradition through Robinson to Cupitt.<sup>76</sup> It legitimises the understanding of sacred, 'religious' texts as appropriating earnest but essentially mundane truths and textual traditions, since the prototype for all religious schemes is the instinct to try to make things better. It also legitimises the use of such texts in contexts, like my own, where the metaphysical axioms they set out are not shared.

Despite the literary smoothness with which the text superimposes different soteriological problems and goals, this superimposition must be expected to be philosophically strange, since the world and eternity are totally different spheres of interest. Let us look a bit more closely at the similarities and differences between Kṛṣṇa's developed theory and the renouncer's worldview, on the one hand, and those between his theory and the tribal / ritual worldview, on the other.

The *Bhagavadgītā* criticises those who renounce action in pursuit of *mokṣa*, but it is also critical of those who act selfishly for the sake of immediate sensual and material success in this or the next life. Hence Kṛṣṇa's first move in the text is to reveal the long-term context of *dehin*, against which any temporary successes are insignificant (2:11-25). To be unaware of this context is to be mistaken about the nature of oneself, one's actions and the extent of their consequences: lack of knowledge leads to psychological grief and repeated embodiments. Elsewhere in the *Mahābhārata* Duryodhana is described in this way: his goal is to vanquish the Pāṇḍavas and expand his kingdom and glory, but this short-term, personal perspective results in constant anxiety, and, although he attains heavenly worlds as a good *kṣatriya* in the old style (*Mahābhārata* 18.1), he is certainly not bound for *mokṣa* anytime soon. It is such people who might in the first

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<sup>76</sup> The tradition is one of explaining human ideas of God in terms of human ideas. Feuerbach 1893:270: 'we have shown that the substance and object of religion is altogether human; we have shown that divine wisdom is human wisdom; that the secret of theology is anthropology; that the absolute mind is the so-called finite subjective mind'. Robinson 1963, Cupitt 1980. This idea, which is persuasive, has been little reflected in liturgy, and the reluctance of established religious institutions to embrace it, though of course perfectly understandable, has been responsible for the absence of concerted sensible thinking with respect to the role of ideology in the modern age.

place lead society and ritual to become such that their renunciation would be an attractive proposition. The *Bhagavadgītā* marries its practical objections to the social consequences of a position (selfish people are an unsightly nuisance) to its philosophical refutation of the position itself (they do not see the bigger picture of *dehin*), just as it does when criticising the renouncers (renunciation threatens ritual institutions / it is mistaken in thinking that action *per se* creates *karmabandha*). In both of these cases, then, philosophy can be seen as the handmaiden of the editorial agenda.

In their opposition to the *sakta* actor, the renouncers of action are Kṛṣṇa's ally, for they share his long-term soteriological context. Kṛṣṇa's opposition to physical renunciation is thus ambiguous. We know already from Śaṅkara's commentary that it is at least ambiguous enough to allow him to be viewed as its champion.<sup>77</sup> He views physical renunciation as unnecessary and irresponsible, but certainly not as fruitless: 'saṁnyāsa and *karmayoga* both lead to the unbettered' (5:2ab)... 'the station attained by means of *sāṁkhyas* is also reached by means of *yogas*' (5:5ab). The renouncers are, until Kṛṣṇa appears, the yardstick of progress: their stature is not reduced but instead is matched by the *karmayogins*. The main reason why renunciation is a flawed method of attaining *mokṣa* is that 'a person does not attain lack of *karman* [*i.e.* lack of *karmabandha*] from not undertaking actions' (3:4ab)... 'for no one ever, even for a moment, remains not doing action' (3:5ab). That is, renunciation of action is in principle impossible for human beings. If *karmabandha* can be avoided, it cannot be by attempting inactivity, and *karmabandha*'s roots must be mental. In this way, attempting inactivity is likely to be a symptom of attachment to inactivity, or attachment to imagined personal outcomes of inactivity, or aversion to imagined personal outcomes of activity, in which case it would cause the accumulation of *karmabandha*. 'The one who, curbing the organs of action, sits remembering sense-objects with the mind, is deluded and is said to be of false conduct' (3:6).<sup>78</sup> The link between *karman* and *karmabandha* is

<sup>77</sup> Śaṅkara thinks that a person will renounce action as soon as *brahmavidyā* has been attained, thus renunciation has its place, at least for those in their last birth. Śaṅkara apparently does not understand *prakṛti* as constituting a complete causal scheme operating through all bodies, whether they contain unenlightened souls or enlightened ones: he cannot, therefore, accept that enlightened people do not see themselves as agents at the same time as unenlightened observers do see them as agents. When discussing 2:21, Śaṅkara refers forward to 5:13, which describes the *vaśin* (governor) as inactive (Sastri 1977:47-48). What Kṛṣṇa means here is that the *antakarāṇa* should realise that all actions are conditioned and effected by *prakṛti*, and hence that it, the *antakarāṇa*, is inactive. If *vaśin* is to be interpreted as referring to *dehin*, as both Śaṅkara and his hypothetical opponent maintain, then the inactivity of *dehin* may still be safeguarded by taking *saṁnyasya* as an imperative addressed to Arjuna rather than as an absolute describing *vaśin*.

<sup>78</sup> See Aurobindo 1970:101: 'I cannot think that *mithyācāra* means a hypocrite. How is a man a hypocrite who inflicts on himself so severe and complete a privation? He is mistaken and deluded, *vimūdhātmā*,

broken. But since there used to be such a link, *karman* is sometimes used in the text to mean *karmabandha*, an ironic pun. So 3:4b (quoted above), and so 4:18-20.

If Kṛṣṇa's attitude to the renouncers is ambiguous because he shares their goal of *mokṣa*, so also is his attitude to the ritualists, because he shares their goal of maintaining ritual traditions and social activity. Social and ritual institutions, their participants and their *brāhmaṇa* overseers, had no doubt been under attack from the renunciative ideology for a time before the *Bhagavadgītā* made its contribution to the debate. The text makes it clear that there are ritual participants whose participation is solely for the sake of their own personal glory, wealth, reputation and *svarga* (heavenly station after death) (2:42-43). Such folk are criticised for being unaware of the long-term context of *dehin*. Now, it is clear that, within the ritual context, attempts were made to justify and encourage ritual action in terms of its results in this life and the next. The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*, a school of orthoprax *brāhmaṇism*, bears witness to a tradition of explanation of the necessity of Vedic ritual. This tradition stands parallel to the renunciative ideology: it defends ritual according to a short-term soteriology, where renunciation threatens it according to a long-term one. Kṛṣṇa's attack on this tradition (2:42-46, 9:20-21, 15:1-3, 17:11-12) reveals a further subtlety in his analysis of action. Though, in the long term, and with regard to the achievement of *mokṣa*, the actual actions one performs are irrelevant,<sup>79</sup> ritual and social activity is motivated by its effectiveness as such. Kṛṣṇa does not deny the effectiveness of action: 'in the human world, success born of action comes quickly' (4:12cd). Action is obviously effective within one lifetime: the Vedic tradition considered it to be so here and hereafter, and Kṛṣṇa does not dispute this. His point is that, if one always concentrates on the short-term results, the long-term result will be no *mokṣa*. Because of their difference of timescale, the Vedic scheme of salvation and Kṛṣṇa's scheme of ultimate release can stand side by side, despite using different interpretations of *karman*. Identically ritually active people may be bound for *svargaloka* (and subsequent rebirth) or for *mokṣa*, depending on their attitude to their actions. The *sakta karmin* is likely to be anxious about his or her future, and thus to forego *sukha* as well as *mokṣa*.

If Kṛṣṇa can defend ritual behaviour at the same time as criticising those who engage in ritual with personal motives, he must have some other explanation of its

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and his *ācāra*, his formally regulated method of self-discipline, is a false and vain method –this is surely all that the *Gītā* means'.

<sup>79</sup> They are dictated by one's *svabhāva*: *sūdras* and the *dvija*, for example, perform very different rituals, but both may achieve *mokṣa* if they do them *asakta*.

necessity. Indeed he does: ritual is required because it feeds the *devas* and thus keeps the world in order, to the benefit of everybody else as well as the ritual actor. This point will be explored in chapter four. For the present, it is worth looking at the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* attitude to ritual action: although this attitude may or may not be synchronous with the composition of the *Bhagavadgītā*,<sup>80</sup> it is important to note that, while Kṛṣṇa says rituals should be performed for the world's sake, not one's own, the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* cannot imagine that they would be, and highlights their personal consequences as a practical motivation for their performance.

The *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* understanding of *karman* goes far beyond the self-seeking ritualism caricatured by Kṛṣṇa. In fact, only certain types of ritual *karman* are performed with a personal goal in mind: many rites have cosmic effects unobservable except insofar as the world continues to function properly. *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra* 11.1:26-28 differentiates the two:

'In ordinary life, the action is determined by the need. Since the action is subservient to the need, and the need is perceptible, the actions should be regarded as complete only on the accomplishment of the purpose. Contrariwise, when it is purely a matter of *dharma*, and thus there is no visible result,<sup>81</sup> the action will be complete [by doing it] exactly according to the text' (translation: Clooney 1990:135-136).

In this latter case, the cosmic dimension being impersonal, the personal mental component of the action (the 'need' and its mental concomitants) is not emphasised. Mental emphasis makes far more sense when the actor perceives himself or herself as directly profiting by the action. In such cases Jaimini straightforwardly assumes that the motivating force will be a selfish one, even though, from the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* viewpoint, the action is required because of the Vedic injunction alone (Clooney 1990:141, 211-212). The *Bhagavadgītā* disputes this assumption. If Jaimini can expect the dutiful performance of ritual actions which are 'purely a matter of *dharma*' (*i.e.* which have no personal 'carrot'), then it is fair enough for Kṛṣṇa, by emphasising the social as well as the cosmic dimensions of *lokasamgraha*, to try to cleanse the ritual world of all *sakta* action. The difference here is that Jaimini wants to safeguard the whole ritual tradition, whereas Kṛṣṇa is willing to lose those rituals whose cosmic effects are negligible. It is not beside the point here to suggest that those rituals

<sup>80</sup> Clooney 1990:19: '*Mīmāṃsā*... goes back at least to the time of the Brāhmaṇas (c. 1000 BCE and thereafter)... The Sūtras of Jaimini, dated around 200 BCE, constitute the first integral text the school offers us'. Clooney's dating of these Sūtras agrees with that of J. L. Brockington 1981:104, Basham 1956:330 and Dasgupta 1922:1.370, but Lipner 1994:156 has them 200 years later.

<sup>81</sup> The continuing proper functioning of the cosmos is presumably visible to some extent: what are here referred to as actions 'purely a matter of *dharma*' are those with no specific *individual* payback for the ritual actor.

promising great personal *phala* might have resulted in a large part of the priests' income. Kṛṣṇa's theories can thus be seen in terms of limiting the damage caused to *brāhmanical* interests by the renunciative ideology.

Jaimini's suggestion that the significance of certain *karmans* is beyond human ken is an echo of Kṛṣṇa's demonstration of the cosmic necessity of the Kurukṣetra war (11:33c: 'I myself have doomed [these warriors] ages ago'). In both cases it is the word *dharma* which best expresses this kind of necessity. Clooney says (p. 151) that 'the Veda supplies for the ritual reasons beyond human experience, yet also allows these to be related to secular, empirical goals and motives'. Kṛṣṇa also makes sense of the war in this latter sense: he says to Arjuna, 'either, killed, you will obtain *svarga*, or, having won, you will enjoy the earth, so stand up, resolution made for battle' (2:37). But Kṛṣṇa quickly moves away from this short-termist argumentation, which does not take into account the broader issues involved: in fact, he deplures acting according to such motives. It is Arjuna's mistake to see the war in terms of his own and his family's involvement, and therefore to arrogate himself to the position of being able to assess its desirability.<sup>82</sup> If an action is *dharmic*, personal considerations do not apply. The backbone of the *karmayoga* is the removal of personal considerations in action. Kṛṣṇa provides a deterministic analysis of physical events (3:5cd: 'all, unwishing, are made to do *karman* by the *guṇas* born of *prakṛti*'), and continues with the revelation that *prakṛti* is an aspect of himself (7:4), therefore guaranteeing all actual activity as *dharmic* according to Jaimini's use of the word. However, this makes it questionable what on earth *adharmā* might be in 4:7 ('whenever there arises the diminution of *dharma*, the rise of *adharmā*, then I send myself forth') or in the Dharmasūtras. It seems that, since 'actions are being done wholly by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*' (3:27ab), the notion of *dharma*, as something that people should do but might not, breaks down. *Dharma* and *adharmā* in this perspective do not describe the objective world, but are only counters in the intersubjective discourse of those under the delusion of agency. Because all recipients of the text were expected to be more or less under this delusion, the text, wanting as it does to talk about the truth behind the delusion, must play some clever games and negotiate between two incommensurable perspectives. This will be further explored in

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<sup>82</sup> To be fair, Kṛṣṇa has, throughout book five of the *Mahābhārata*, colluded in the production of this perspective of Arjuna's, having emphasised the mundane benefits of the war for the Pāṇḍavas (kingdom and honour) without mentioning its cosmic necessity or *lokasaṃgraha*. That such a perspective has failed, making the *Bhagavadgītā* necessary, demonstrates that only a small subsection of necessary actions can be justified in terms of their protagonists' immediate benefit, and therefore raises the question of whether even that small subsection should be so justified.

chapter five.

The *bhakti* emphasis in the *Bhagavadgītā* has, so far in this thesis, received much less attention than its historical effects might warrant. However, in the text the *bhakti* framework fits over the existing scheme of *asakta karman*, and serves its end by suggesting 'serving Kṛṣṇa' as the ultimate non-personal motivator for human action. The philosophical work of marrying together various goals (psychological equanimity, heavenly pleasures, and *mokṣa*) has already been done by Kṛṣṇa before he reveals himself to be the Almighty. It is this philosophical work which has been under scrutiny in this chapter and thus the clearest possible picture must be gained of its context. This context is pre-theistic, and, more importantly, is not primarily philosophical: the context as presented in the text is the practical one of decision in action. The text negotiates between social movements rather than between philosophical ones. Arjuna's '*iti anuśuśrūma*' (1:44d) indicates that there had already been reflection on, and systematisation of, normative action, but even so he only invokes it as a footnote, to justify intellectually his naturally occurring horror. What have been called soteriological schemes are in fact the epiphenomena of human behavioural fact, hastily improvised in retrospect. It is clear that the two schemes sketched in this chapter, the Vedic / ancestral soteriology and the *mokṣa* soteriology, only came to be more-or-less clearly defined in response to friction between different behaviour patterns, friction which was itself a condition of those patterns being distinguished in the first place. This process of becoming distinguished is marked by an extreme catholicism in the collection of conceptual material with which to construct an intellectual defence of whatever lifestyle. Hence the variety of different aspects under which main themes are illustrated: the text witnesses many ways of thinking of the soul, rebirth, the human subject, action, and so on. The metaphysics of the *Bhagavadgītā*, then, just fills in the gaps (ultimately perhaps social gaps) which have been revealed in the worldview of some through their observation of, and reflection on, human behavioural differences. The text is involved in building an intellectual platform on which to justify responsible ritual activity whilst in pursuit of truth, equanimity and *mokṣa*. Because of this, it is not naturally amenable to understanding in terms of theological categories, but only in terms of the different traditions of behaviour coexisting in the societies which produced it. The philosophy of *bhakti* continues this project, integrating a host of religious traditions of behaviour, as will be discussed in chapter five. What has been illustrated in this chapter is that the philosophy of the *Bhagavadgītā* can be explained historically, as resulting from the interference of traditions of behaviour that ensued when population density increased in

ancient north India. It is only by contrast and comparison that traditions of behaviour are identified as such, and the people involved in them begin to notice what is at stake and thus to explain or defend their behaviour to themselves and to the traditions they are meeting.



#### Chapter four: *Yajña*

This chapter will explore the philosophical consequences of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s attempt to use the idea of *yajña*<sup>1</sup> to illuminate and explain Kṛṣṇa's proposed methodology of action. The text's exposition of *yajña* in this context appeals to a *brāhmaṇical* presentation of the idea of the cosmos being sustained, through human action, in a proper manner which will reciprocally ensure the material welfare of all creatures within it. This idea is also contained in the text's use of the words *lokasaṃgraha*, the holding-together, welfare, or coherence of the world (Zaehner 1969:169), and *dharma*, 'that which holds together, supports, upholds' (Zimmer 1951:163). The *asakta* actor, says Kṛṣṇa, acts for the sake of these things. The first section of the chapter shows that the sustenance and coherence of the world constitute the fruit of activities and, being pursued, should render such activities *sakta*. I argue that the only alternative to thinking of one's actions in terms of fruits is not to think of them at all. Although this idea is barely intelligible, at least as regards one-off actions such as participation in the *Mahābhārata* war, and although the text does not admit that this is what it must perforce mean by *asakta karman*, I suggest that *asakta* actions are psychologically void and only describable in terms of *yajña*, *dharma* or *lokasaṃgraha* from an external viewpoint. I show that *yajña* fails to explicate the mental attitude that Kṛṣṇa is keen for Arjuna to adopt, because the text cannot find a bridge between the traditional, cosmic and external meaning of the term, and the new, internal meaning which Kṛṣṇa implies. An internalised type of *yajña* is alluded to by the text, but seems to refer to alternative ritual practices: these practices are hard to compare with the *brāhmaṇical yajña* because they do not share the same ostensible purpose.

Having ascertained that the idea of *yajña* contained in the text is incoherent in itself and also unhelpful for Kṛṣṇa's exposition of *asakta karman*, the second section of the chapter attempts briefly to site this eventuality in terms of the socio-political context of the text's production. I argue that the text's differing views of *yajña* serve its assertion of the primacy of the Vedic ritual and ideological complex and its assimilation of other cultural forms to that Vedic complex which, since about the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s production, began to go hand in hand with *brāhmaṇical* hegemony over

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<sup>1</sup> This term will not be translated here. The most common translation is 'sacrifice', a word whose usage was revolutionised by Christian theology and which today has a heavily metaphorical sense. In many ways the histories of the terms are parallel, but it would certainly be hazardous to suggest that a modern sense of 'sacrifice' corresponds to the *Bhagavadgītā*'s sense of *yajña*.

a new kind of society. The discussion will be cursory: my primary purpose is not to contribute to the debates on ancient Indian socio-political history, but to explicate the peculiarities of the *Bhagavadgītā*. I show how the text's social agenda is masked behind an apparently philosophical reconciliation of fundamentally different goals, prosperity on the one hand and *mokṣa* / peace of mind on the other.

The final section of the chapter introduces several interesting textual applications of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s unruly concept of *yajña*. The *Mahābhārata* presents the war as a *yajña*, and I show that the Pāṇḍavas' justification of their engagement in it can be seen as applying the *lokasaṃgraha* model, as given in the *Bhagavadgītā*, to a sphere of action involving complex political and personal realities. This expansion of the notion of *yajña* beyond its old ritual context precipitates a new kind of responsibility into previously straightforward areas of human activity, and, by way of an example, I show that the Dharmaśāstras betray the increasing incidence of Arjuna-type existentiobehavioural crises in ancient India. Arjuna's plight illustrates the failure to find a systematic rationale for decision-making: this failure is bypassed by the text's *bhakti* determinism, a thoroughly philosophical solution which appears to run counter to the purposes of some of the *Mahābhārata*'s editors, and hence appears in the final text only in disguised form.

#### 4.1. Lokasaṃgraha: is it a karmaphala?

'There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation' (Kafka 1954:40).

In the following quotations *yajña* functions as the touchstone of *asakta* action, and *vice versa*:

'This world is bound by *karman* (*karmabandhana*), except *karman* for the sake of *yajña*' (3:9ab).

'The *karman* of he who is acting (*ācarata*) for the sake of *yajna* (*yajñārthāt*) totally melts away' (4:23cd).

'As the unknowing, attached to *karman*, act, so should the knowing, unattached one act, in order to effect *lokasaṃgraha*' (3:25).

The word *yajña*, introduced for the first time in the *Bhagavadgītā* at 3:9, is used to explain Kṛṣṇa's proposed attitude to action, which Arjuna, judging by his question of 3:1-2, is in danger of misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup> Those actions which do not generate

<sup>2</sup> 3:1: 'If *buddhi* is considered by you to be superior to *karman*, then why do you enjoin me to a terrible *karman*?'

*karmabandha* (which can here be interpreted as a binding to rebirth and /or to psychic trauma) are those which are performed by a person *asakta*, or for the sake of *yajña*. *Asakta* and *yajñārtha* are operational synonyms here. Since *yajña* is a word with a good deal more history than is *asakta*, it might be supposed that it could help us understand how *asakta* action might be practically realised: it seems as if Kṛṣṇa is introducing the word for this purpose.

The first section on *yajña* (3:9-26) expounds *yajña* as that which keeps the world rolling. The exception made by 3:9a is a vital one, for it allows the possibility of soteriological progress within the context of conventional responsibility. Any direct correlation between unorthodox lifestyle and progress towards *mokṣa*, such as is suggested by some Upaniṣads and *śramaṇa* groups (see above, 3.3), is refuted by the *Bhagavadgītā*. Without this exception, there seems to be no possible non-binding action. Having made it clear that the most obvious possible motive for action, sense-gratification through the fruits of action, is productive of bondage to rebirth (2:42-53, 72) and to suffering (2:54-71), Kṛṣṇa is in danger of having rendered the category of *asakta karman* psychologically obscure. He has listed many things which do not figure in the consciousness of the *asakta* actor (greed, anger, fear of failure, hope of success, and so on), but not much, apart from a single *buddhi*, secure wisdom (*prajñā*), and serenity (*śānti*), which does. Does an action which is performed *asakta* have any more accessible mental correlates? The text takes pains to try to explain the mentality which would accompany such an action,<sup>3</sup> primarily using the ideas of *jñāna*, *yajña* and *bhakti*, but it also makes it clear that such a mentality is extremely strange and subtle.

*Jñāna*, knowledge, particularly the knowledge of the separation of *deha* and *dehin* (the body and the embodied), is the point of departure for Kṛṣṇa's attitude to action (2:12-30). *Yajña* is more of a motivational key than *bhakti*, which can function almost as a synonym or aspect of *jñāna*.<sup>4</sup> *Yajña* provides a functional explanation of an action in terms of the natural interests and sensibilities of a human actor: a person depends on a certain type of environment, which in turn depends on certain actions from the person. The 'wheel of *yajña*' (3:14-16) is that upon which creatures subsist: the bare necessities of life are dependent upon humanity's *yajña* actions. Failing to act would then have

<sup>3</sup> The word mentality is here used to denote the whole psychological complex.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter five for a full discussion of *bhakti*: briefly, my view is that the ideas of Lordship and paying homage originated in a socio-political rather than a philosophical context, and that, in conjunction with the Epic's philosophical fatalism, *bhakti* must be understood as the surrendering of all physical and mental activities, which are fully explained by causal antecedents howsoever unknown, to the world

repercussions far beyond the sphere of the individual and his or her own-welfare, for all creatures and indeed the whole world-process depend critically upon *yajña*.<sup>5</sup> Even if the system could spare the effort of a small minority of non-actors, non-action would be irresponsible because of the precedent and example it would set (3:21-26).

The reciprocity described here implicates each human individual in a disproportionate manner: not only is the world-system dependent upon human action, but the actions of all humans are potentially dependent on those of certain trend-setting individuals. This recognition of the herd mentality in human societies is a vital part of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s blueprint for widespread progress towards *mokṣa* within a stable social framework. From this viewpoint, individualistic renunciation of action is an incomplete solution to the general problem of suffering, since salvation is possible only from within a human life, and human life depends upon various human activities that do not seem to be anything to do with *mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*.<sup>6</sup>

As explained in the last chapter, the *Bhagavadgītā* deals with several different views of salvation: these seem to be contradictory but often use the same vocabulary in their expression. The Vedic idea of *yajña* is of that upon which material security and prosperity depend. The *Ṛgveda* is replete with hopes that the *yajamāna* may be blessed with long life, great renown, and abundant sons and cows (Bazaz 1975:3-20, Heesterman 1985, 1993). Heesterman (1985:90) characterises the old Vedic *yajña* as a 'fight for the goods of life'. The desirability of these outcomes is unquestioned. The same sense is preserved in the *Bhagavadgītā*, but by this time the desirability of prosperity has been severely attacked by renunciative groups, so *yajña*, to remain a soteriologically relevant concept, must relate directly to the *mokṣa* soteriology. And so

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and, by extension, to Kṛṣṇa its progenitor.

<sup>5</sup> See Gonda 1966a:72: 'The universe and the phenomena of life organise themselves for the benefit of the man who behaves correctly and knows the deeper sense of his socio-religious conduct. Those however who go against the eternal law and infringe the rules of right conduct are liable to unchain serious repercussions, because man's behaviour is indissolubly intertwined with the course of things in the universe'. He goes on to say, in a note to p. 150: 'It is interesting to see that the *Bhagavadgītā*, expounding the doctrine of *karmayoga*—life is work, unconcern for its results is needful— as a way to final emancipation, considers the performance of work a means of 'maintaining the world' (*lokasaṃgraha*, 3:20): that is to say, a perfect discharge of duties..., social and economic action controlled by religious ethics, will prevent the world, the interconnectedness of society, man's 'lebenssphere' from decomposition and sinking into a condition of misery: man makes or wins his *loka*, if he does not act properly there will be no *loka* for him'.

<sup>6</sup> The rising popularity of the *bodhisattva* ideal indicates that the individualistic focus of early *nirvāṇa*-seekers was gradually supplemented by concern for the welfare and soteriological progress of others. This development in Buddhism may well be historically parallel to the *Bhagavadgītā*'s attempts to woo renouncers back into the world of common interests: see Prem 1951:184, Aurobindo 1993:79. In both cases the development can be correlated with the success of the inclusivist social ideologies which supplemented or supplanted exclusivist ones following population growth.

it does, being the only type of action which does not bind within *saṃsāra*. But prosperity has been revalorised and is now, rather than positive, merely not necessarily negative. The *Bhagavadgītā* treats it almost as a by-product of *asakta kārman*: since people cannot but act, they ought, for their own individual good, to do so as *yajña*, and then, coincidentally, the order of the world will be sustained. The source of motivation has been split: on the one hand the psychological justification for *yajña* action is presented in terms of progress towards *mokṣa*, and on the other it is presented in terms of sustaining the world. As a response to the renunciative traditions, the *Bhagavadgītā* has only gone halfway: it has not given any reason why the sustenance of the world should be desirable in itself.

It is, strictly speaking, and from the viewpoint of an individual, not necessary for the text to give any such reason. Since it has already been explained that action is unavoidable, the desirability of world-sustenance, or of any other consequence of *yajña*, the only non-binding action, is a corollary of the desirability of not being bound. This is the logical import of 3:9.<sup>7</sup> But in expounding *yajña* in the following verses (3:10-12), the text seems to assume that world-sustenance contains its own intrinsic desirability. In the old Vedic tradition world-sustenance is no more intrinsically desirable than family prestige and the amassing of wealth: indeed, in the oldest layers of the Veda it is not clear that these two ideas can be differentiated, since the world to be sustained there is one of ancestor-descendant continuity within a context of rival dynasties. The *Bhagavadgītā* is protective of a wider, complex society, and in being so is wary of divisive accumulationism, but since both world-sustenance (in the new sense of an inclusive world) and accumulation are worldly concerns, how can the text reject the latter concern as pernicious but retain the former as liberating? No convincing explanation is given: having baldly stated that *karman* performed for the sake of *yajña* does not bind, the text proceeds as if it has thus established a crucial psychological difference between being motivated by *lokasaṃgraha*, 'the holding-together of the world/s', and being motivated by the personal consequences of an action, that is, by *karmaphala*. But this is exactly what must be independently established, for unless these two types of motivation are psychologically differentiable, the text's claim that

<sup>7</sup> Though the compound *muktasaṅga* in 3:9d is usually taken to mean 'one whose attachment has been released', it could be taken to mean 'one whose attachment is to their being released'. Kṛṣṇa sometimes uses the same kind of language to describe his suggested attitude to *mokṣa* and union with God, as he does to describe the egotistical attitude to worldly phenomena which he condemns. This is perhaps the central paradox of *asakta kārman*, which exists simply because the text takes the form of suggesting *asakta kārman* to Arjuna, and to the reader or hearer of the text, as something purposively to work towards.

*yajña* action does not bind cannot help us to understand what is meant by being (as opposed to having been) *asakta* or *sakta*.

Consider, for example, the viewpoint of a (male) extreme ascetic renunciate, desirous of liberation to such an extent that he is prepared to sacrifice his physical well-being and even his life to that end. His behaviour is now challenged by the text's suggestion that his negligence of his *yajña* duties will have catastrophic worldly results. But catastrophic worldly results are exactly what he is indifferent to. He does not care about the well-being even of his body, so how can he be expected to care about that of the world at large? He is of the opinion that degraded physical conditions can be correlated with exalted soteriological ones: then surely the decay of the world-process constitutes no bad thing from the perspective of the true interests of its true inhabitants, that is, *dehin* or *dehins*. Having defined the world-process as *duḥkha* (suffering), negligence of the action which sustains that process will result in reduction of *duḥkha*. *Lokasaṃgraha* would appear to such a renunciate as a *karmaphala*. He cannot be induced to act for worldly reasons. If you convince him that all creatures are in fact acting continuously and that the only way he can avoid *karmabandha* is by doing so for the sake of *yajña*, then he may thus contribute to world-sustenance: but this is not his intention, just his means,<sup>8</sup> and the motivation for his action will be the same as the motivation for his erstwhile attempts at non-action.

Kṛṣṇa suggests that *kāma* can and must be eradicated (3:36-43 and elsewhere). But to juxtapose this with an analysis of *yajña* is to do violence to the logic of *yajña* as elaborated in the Vedic tradition from the earliest times. This logic is concisely summarised by *Manusmṛti* 2:2-5:

'The nature of desire (*kāma*) is not praised, but there is no desirelessness in this world. Vedic study and engagement in Vedic action are indeed derived from desire. Desire is rooted in intention (*saṃkalpa*): *yajñas* originate from intentions: all vows, disciplines and *dharma*s are known to be born of intentions. Never is any activity of a desire-less one seen in this world: whatsoever anyone does is the doing of their desire. The one operating correctly in these (desires / activities) goes to the undying place, and also in this world they attain all intended desires'.

Here the intimate relationship between *yajña* (the quintessence of appropriate action), *saṃkalpa* and *kāma* is explicit, and the possibility of leading an active but desireless life is disallowed. This also seems to be the sense at *Mahābhārata* 3.201:2-3<sup>9</sup> and at

<sup>8</sup> See 6:3: 'Action is said to be the means (*kāraṇa*) of the *muni* desirous of rising to *yoga*. Equanimity (*śama*) is said to be the *kāraṇa* of the one who has risen to *yoga*'. Because the latter is *asakta* and has renounced all *saṃkalpas* (intentions), he or she has no ends to have means for. This verse puns on the word *kāraṇa*.

<sup>9</sup> 'First mind (*manas* / *mahat*) stirs for the sake of human understanding, attaining which it partakes of desire and anger, then strives for their sake, undertakes action and pursues the repetition of the desired

*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4:5.<sup>10</sup> Mañki at *Mahābhārata* 12.171:23 says that *saṃkalpa* is the root of *kāma* and that he is therefore giving up *saṃkalpas*, but this is in the context of his renunciation of action and so fits the conclusions of the *Manusmṛti* passage.

Elsewhere in the Vedic tradition *kāma* is intimately associated with only one particular class of *yajñas*, the *kāmya yajñas*, which are ritual acts undertaken for the acquisition of a certain personally desired outcome (Gonda 1977:467-468). Some of the terms used in the *Bhagavadgītā* are technical terms drawn from the context of such rites. The *yajamāna* on whose behalf a *yajña* is performed must be subject to the desire for the *phala* which such a *yajña* is supposed to bring. It is this desire that brings about his<sup>11</sup> intention (*saṃkalpa*) to have the *yajña* performed, and which constitutes his entitlement or qualification (*adhikāra*) to do so.<sup>12</sup> These *kāmya yajñas* are repeatedly criticised by the *Bhagavadgītā*, at 2:42-43 as well as in the frequent criticism of *kāma* and in the insistence that actions based on *saṃkalpas* must be avoided (4:19, 6:2, 4, 24).<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that the actions of *kāmya yajñas* cannot be *asakta* and that the *Bhagavadgītā* seeks to discourage them. However, whilst the other types of *yajña* do not so explicitly involve desires and intentions, it is far from obvious that they do not involve them at all. In a technical and ritualistic sense, abandoning *saṃkalpas* may mean abandoning just *kāmya yajñas*, but in the wider sense in which Manu understands the term, abandoning *saṃkalpas* would mean abandoning all selfconscious action. After all, any *consciousness* of acting for the sake of *lokasaṃgraha* must contain the intention that the world be held together, and the desire for such an outcome.

A radical solution to this conundrum has been suggested by Teschner, who claims that the *Bhagavadgītā* bids us to renounce all intentionality whatsoever (1992:66): ‘to

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images and smells.’

<sup>10</sup> ‘Whatever desire arises, that resolve arises; whatever resolve arises, one does that action; whatever action one does, one obtains it[’s fruits].’

<sup>11</sup> In the texts, the *yajamāna* is male. Women participate in their husbands’ rituals and share the resulting *phalas*.

<sup>12</sup> See Clooney 1990:176-194, Kane 1962:V.1317-1318. For an application of the same theoretical distinctions to *pūjā* rituals, see Bühnemann 1988:83-87.

<sup>13</sup> Lariviere 1988 points out that *adhikāra* indicates responsibility and duty to perform ritual action as well as a right to do so. This means that a *kāmya yajña* whose *adhikāra* stipulates desire for a certain result is obligatory for anyone with that particular desire as long as they can afford to have it performed. This does not affect the *Bhagavadgītā*’s distaste for *kāmya yajñas* because a *yogin* would not have such a desire and thus would not qualify for performance whatever their means.

engage in action without concern for the fruits of action is to act without depicting the action in thought or speech as having its reason for being in a projected goal'. This view describes human action in non-teleological terms as a mechanical process based on material and efficient causal factors which the actor does not know and need not try to know. It supposes that, since any action must have its causal antecedents, the normal psychological correlates of action, that is, the presentation of the body's acts to the mind as something in need of explanation by motive, can, and should, be bypassed.

Like Manu, Teschner understands *saṃkalpa* in the text as a non-technical term (that is, as applicable to all selfconscious actions, not just *kāmya yajñas*). Teschner, however, is arguing the very opposite of Manu, namely that it is in principle possible for action to proceed through human beings without those human beings having any specific idea of what they are up to or why.<sup>14</sup> Such a human being would be internally irresponsible, operating outside the discourse of conventional subjecthood, even though their actions might, according to the *Bhagavadgītā*, be such that observers would term them responsible and assume them to be selfconscious.

It is troublesome to apply Teschner's idea to the text. The text leads us to suppose that its use of the word *saṃkalpa* is technical and ritualistic in all four cases, for otherwise the abandonment of all *saṃkalpas* could not be correlated with selfconsciously acting for the sake of *lokasaṃgraha*. For the text to make sense, it must disagree with both Teschner and Manu and hold that *lokasaṃgraha* is not a *saṃkalpa*. That the text introduces *lokasaṃgraha* as a motivating factor<sup>15</sup> to replace sense-gratification suggests that at least some of its authors could not imagine human action without some such motivator. It is possible that an early version of the *Bhagavadgītā* did envisage radically demotivated action and that the *lokasaṃgraha* idea was introduced by a subsequent editor who could not (or had good reasons not to), but Teschner himself does not suggest such a scenario: indeed, he does not acknowledge that the text's proposal of *lokasaṃgraha* flatly contradicts his thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Danto 1973:25-26 suggests that 'intentions imply a view of history... in which one is able to be effective in shaping events to fit one's representations... It is in this sense that intentions imply the falsity of fatalism... And it is in this sense that actions, if they occur, refute fatalism. For actions imply intentions, and intentions imply through their truth-attitudes that fatalism is false'. Danto's use of 'action' here corresponds to Manu's use of '*karman*', but not to the *Bhagavadgītā*'s. For the *Bhagavadgītā*, blinking is a *karman*. Furthermore (see below, chapter five), what Danto calls 'fatalism' here is a straw man, for it applies to bodily movements but not to mental events: can I not be fated to intend, and thus to misrepresent my bodily motions as actions?

<sup>15</sup> The use of 'motivating factor' here is broader than the text's use of *saṃkalpa*. The text wants to banish all *saṃkalpas* while continuing to talk in terms of justification, rationalisation or self-presentation of action.



We must explore the intelligibility the idea of demotivated action. The *Bhagavadgītā* goes on to explain that all actions are performed mechanically by *prakṛti* as part of a closed causal scheme, but *ahaṁkāra*, *manas* and *buddhi* are aspects of *prakṛti*, and thus any cogitations about an action being undertaken, including one's perceived (but ultimately false) reasons for acting, may constitute a vital part of that causal scheme. In this perspective, motivations are a component of the manner in which humans act. If, as Kṛṣṇa later reveals, all actions, even those that appear to be voluntary, are automatic, it does not necessarily follow that the same actions could ever be achieved without appearing to be voluntary. We have here hit upon a vital problem in our understanding of *asakta karman*. It is difficult to imagine a socially operative person being radically demotivated in Teschner's sense, maintaining the thought 'I am doing nothing at all' (5:8-9). It is one thing to assent to the truth of Kṛṣṇa's deconstruction of agency: it is quite another to apply this truth experientially whilst engaged in conventional behaviours. After all, 'This entire world is deluded by these three conditions of being, which constitute the *guṇas*' (7:13): 'All creatures in creation [or all creatures at birth] will go into confusion, by the delusion of the pairs-of-opposites (*dvandvas*) produced by desire and hatred' (7:27). But the text's mentioning that as a general rule people are not able to perform *asakta karman*, and our suspicion that a person so performing would be psychologically unintelligible, are both bypassed by the repeated insistence that, though exceedingly rare, such people are occasionally to be found (6:25-36, 7:3, 19). The text thinks that, by rising above the *dvandvas* and renouncing *karmaphalas*, a person can give up *kāmya yajñas* but still be socially responsible and active. However, the demotivation that disqualifies *kāmya yajñas* would seem also to threaten many of the activities that the text wants to encourage. For the text to work philosophically, the set of actions it approves of must be coextensive with the set of actions (or perhaps they're just events here) which a human could perform without *kāma*, without *saṁkalpa*, without attachment.

The *Bhagavadgītā*'s connection of *asakta karman* with *lokasaṁgraha* constitutes a reconceptualisation of *yajña*: the sustaining power of *yajña*, previously exhaustively controlled through the Veda-ordained ritual complex, is now seen to be activated by any activity that, while facilitating escape from *saṁsāra*, also contains a responsible environmental awareness. The question of where this leaves the Vedic ritual is handled with some delicacy by the text. Whilst it is clearly embarrassed by some types of ritual excess (2:42-43), the text is keen to preserve traditional practice. This, and more, can be

done by internalising the source of good and bad *karman*: then, even ritually correct actions bind the actor if undertaken in the wrong spirit. But at the same time as internalising the causes of bondage, the text hangs on to a more physically mechanistic picture of the environmental effects of action when it describes how sacrificial smoke is vital for the ecosystem (3:10-14). From this perspective, with its this-worldly focus and its behaviouristic causal scheme, it is surely of no consequence whether the ritually active are *sakta* or *asakta*. The text would perhaps be logically neater if it held hard and fast to a distinction between the physical aspect of action with its external worldly result, and the mental aspect of action with its individual psychological and post-mortem result. But the text recognises that, as a matter of human fact, these two are linked. Hence it claims (17:23-28) that ‘wishing for release’ and ‘not aiming for fruit’ is the primordially ordained manner for the performance of ritual and religious action, and that ritual action performed in the absence of faith (*śraddhā*) has no effect on one’s post-mortem progress *or in this world*. The text does not, however, suggest how the *devas* of 3:11-12, who are fed by ritual offerings and who consequently re-nourish the cosmos, might distinguish between good food and bad: that is to say, it does not explain how the inner mental attitude of the *yajamāna*, be this *asakta* and imbued with *śraddhā*, or *sakta* and devoid of *śraddhā*, could affect the cosmic efficacy of the *yajña*’s smoke. Further, when the text opens up *yajña*’s sustaining power beyond the Vedic fire to many kinds of action (4:25-33), the mechanism of exactly how *yajña* actions sustain is obscured. By defining *yajña* in terms of motivation, as a correlate of an *asakta* attitude, the text effectively betrays the very wheel-of-sacrifice it describes. The *asakta* actor has, according to the main thrust of the *Bhagavadgītā*, transcended the ordinary way of accounting for actions: being unmotivated by greed and anger, the *asakta* person naturally discharges those duties which are deemed culturally appropriate. Whereas some people acting similarly might have recourse to explanations of why this particular line of action is justifiable from this or that particular viewpoint, *asakta* actors are subject to no such insecurity. They have no logical need even for the most environmentally aware and self-effacing justifications of action: considering any action that they might perform to be self-justified, that is, justified by the causal logic of its own occurrence and by implication by the whole world as its ground, they replace justification by faith. This formulation comes close to Teschner’s interpretation. However, on this view there would be no need for Kṛṣṇa to introduce the idea of *lokasaṃgraha*, for this idea would not figure in the consciousness of the *asakta* actor. To present *lokasaṃgraha* as a rationale for action logically parallel to *karmaphala*, as

Kṛṣṇa does, is to make it irrelevant to the process of being *asakta*. *Lokasaṃgraha* might be a useful concept for observers seeking to explain to themselves what the *asakta karmin* is up to. It might also be a useful concept to those who, having acted whilst briefly *asakta*, seek to explain to themselves what they were up to. But it has no place in the mentality of the *asakta* person either while acting or for as long afterwards as he or she remains *asakta*. It is an external description of an action masquerading as an internal one. Any internal description of the *asakta karmin* must be misleading: to act *asakta* is to do so without specific rationalisation, and so the *asakta* actor would indeed ‘abandon all *dharmas*’ (18:66a), even though, for the duration of their non-attachment, precisely this would be their *svadharmā*. But where does that leave those of us who, like Arjuna, seem to have some other *svadharmā* most of the time?

At this stage, the conflict between Teschner’s interpretation and the text reflects badly upon the text rather than upon Teschner. The text, at the same time as claiming that we can and should act *asakta*, is keen to encourage, by hook or by crook, the performance of certain ritual actions, and in doing so is quite willing to engage with its audience at the level of rationalisations of action,<sup>16</sup> to the extent of preferring one type of rationalisation (*lokasaṃgraha*) over another (*karmaphala*). Unless we find some philosophical explanation for their distinction we shall have no option but to explain this eventuality in terms of an authorial, and apparently *brāhmaṇical*, socio-ritual subtext.

The question then becomes: what is the psychological mark of *asakta*-ness? Can actions which appear to be impossible without *kāma* and intentions of some kind still be performed, but with that intentional nexus somehow made unconscious, put into perspective by a coexisting *asakta* consciousness? Can the desire apparently implied and marked by action be reduced to a purely formal existence, operating in such a way as to result in action without causing the person to be attached? By suggesting that Arjuna be motivated by *lokasaṃgraha*, Kṛṣṇa seems to be suggesting so.<sup>17</sup> This

<sup>16</sup> Likewise the school of *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā*, discussed above, 3.4.

<sup>17</sup> Tilak, Gandhi and Raju understand that *lokasaṃgraha* is to be desired, and take pains to differentiate this type of desire from more selfish desires which cause bondage (Agarwal 1993:311-313, Thomas 1987:67). However, they do not provide a convincing method by which one might decide which type one is motivated by. None is able to do much more than restate that the motivation is in terms of oneself in one case and in terms of others, or of the world as a whole, in the other. Tilak 1936:466 admits possible interference between these two, taking recourse in the concept of duty to guard against attachment to *lokasaṃgraha*. Hirianna, quoted by Agarwal 1993:391: ‘a conscious assumption by an individual, of the role of a social benefactor, is likely to result in a sense of self-importance which is ruinous to all spiritual growth’.

suggestion is also made by 2:70: desires enter the *asakta karmin* without noticeable effect. Kṛṣṇa says at 3:40ab that the seat or basis (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of desire is the senses, *manas* and *buddhi*. Earlier (2:41-44, 49-53) he emphasises the key role of *buddhi* in the *yogic* process. Crucially, he applies the adjective *asakta* to *buddhi* and to *ātman* but never, for example, to the *indriyas*. These three textual clues can help us to imagine a situation where actions are initially motivated or suggested by the operation of *kāma* within the senses or *manas*, but before being carried out are monitored and transformed by an *asakta buddhi* which is single and desireless and which only allows the actualisation of appropriate action in a non-binding manner. The filtering and demotivating operation performed by the *asakta buddhi* can then be associated with Manu's 'one operating correctly in these (desires / activities)' (*Manusmṛti* 2:5a). Though the text talks about *buddhi* (see below, 5.7), the idea being traced here can only be found by reading between the lines. Although the text's authors had an earnest desire to legitimate certain types of social behaviour without jeopardising progress towards *mokṣa*, and although they discovered, in the proposition '*asakta karman* does not bind', a theoretical basis for such a possibility, nonetheless the philosophical integration of this theoretical basis into the existing conceptual landscape remains incomplete. The recognition that this is the case is the recognition that the text's purpose may not have been primarily philosophical. In attempting to sketch the possible completion of that which the text leaves incomplete, we are investigating the intellectual integrity of the notion of *asakta karman*.

It is tempting to describe the difference between *lokasaṃgraha* and *karmaphala* as that between selfless and selfish motives, but this temptation should be avoided, for several reasons. The words 'selfless' and 'selfish' are overburdened with, respectively, moral accolade and moral opprobrium. This moral stance, that is, the evaluative sense of the words, figures within an uncertain context of western, broadly Christian values, in which such morality has been the defender of certain socio-political projects and imperialistic ideologies.<sup>18</sup> Even though it might easily be argued that the difference between *lokasaṃgraha* and *karmaphala* comes, through texts like the *Bhagavadgītā*, to embody a morality defensive of similar socio-political projects and comparable imperialistic ideologies, the connotation of the English terms is unlikely to fit the

<sup>18</sup> The communalism contained in Christian morality has easily been transposed into nationalistic forms, which may help to explain Christianity's survival. See for example the felicity with which Christianity is equated with France, and Islam with Spain, in the *Song of Roland* (Owen 1972): many might suggest that in fact Jesus stood against this kind of exclusivist communalism.

*Bhagavadgītā* exactly. We must, in the first instance, try to understand our terms descriptively. It is not clear, however, that any tight definition of 'selfish' or 'selfless' as descriptive words is possible. This is because, in western as in Buddhist philosophy, no satisfactory referent has been found for the word 'self'. It is easy to explain the origin of some such concept, given that human beings are automotive and spatially discrete: legal practice, in particular, has had to investigate the mental correlates of action in order to categorise otherwise ambiguous actions as acceptable or unacceptable, and the hiddenness of mentality means that, as in Sanskrit with the word '*ātman*', a reflexive pronoun has been reified.<sup>19</sup> However, in recent times the biological sciences, being less constrained by the need to treat spatial separation as an ultimate fact, have begun to move beyond this ideological way of understanding humans. An example of such movement is the ethological debate over the interpretation of apparently altruistic behaviours, in which the very idea of altruism has been gradually dissolved.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly, the individual creature is seen not as an entity in itself, capable of identifying and pursuing (or refusing to pursue) its own best interests, but as a temporary combination of genes, each contributing to the creature's behaviour in various ways, which have been selected, on the basis of their differential ability to survive through time, by the sexual production of genetically similar offspring and by the nurture, howsoever oblique, of genetically similar relatives. If 'self' is to have any meaning as a unique particularisation in this context, it must refer to the particular combination of genes which a creature embodies, supplemented by the unique history of the creature. The characterisation of genes as selfish in this scenario is inappropriate, because they can only be deemed purposive in a metaphorical sense (see above, 2.6), but it is increasingly easy to understand behaviours as situation-specific responses, by the genes-and-history 'self', to the fact that the optimum conditions for the reproduction and survival of one's genes will dissolve if not maintained. No behaviour can be conceived which does not fall under this rubric, because there is a continuous spectrum of genetic similarity (an insect is genetically similar to me, though less so than my identical twin), and because such similarity has to be assessed, in the normal run of a

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<sup>19</sup> Legal practice has never really got beyond its ability to categorise a person as undesirable and remove them: further questions, though obviously pertinent, cannot really be dealt with properly within the practical dualism of guilty and not guilty. Before the possibilities of exile or imprisonment, in ancient 'not-yet-society', there was of course communal punishment, *i.e.* ethnic cleansing, which naturally persists. It is likely that the new society forced discourse onto discrete persons, with everybody having a first (non-family, non-nick-) name.

<sup>20</sup> The modern biological debate can be traced back to Kropotkin 1902. More recently, the debate has been in specifically genetic terms: see Trivers 1971, Dawkins 1976, Kitcher 1993.

creature's life, by imprecise means. We have here replaced an idea of self based on the spatio-temporal separation of creatures with one based on their fundamental unity as genetically produced: insofar as we ask ourselves questions about a certain creature's behaviour, such behaviour is now *necessarily* 'selfish', because no other explanation is available for the ability to act. In other words, the gap between 'selfish' and 'selfless' has been closed by the deconstruction of the shifting, improvised and ideological term 'self', and its replacement, with respect to the causes of action, by that of a collection of genes which is scientifically observable as it is added to, discarded from and re-permuted through the generations. In this context, which bears comparison with the *Bhagavadgītā*'s deconstruction of the conventional self, action is being looked at as it were from the outside of the experience of the person whose body is acting. The question of what it is like for the person is out of range. Since 'selfish' and 'desirous' register only as supposedly experiential terms, we can make a blanket statement, tautologically reducing all actions to 'selfish' ones, as does the genetic determinist in this caricature, or to 'desirous' ones, as does Manu. The *Bhagavadgītā* makes neither of these moves, and so can play with its language to full rhetorical effect.

We cannot then use 'selfish' and 'selfless', because we do not know what they mean. But it is not clear that the *Bhagavadgītā* knows what it means, either, when it singles out *lokasaṃgraha* to provide an explanatory example of *asakta karman*. After all, the text will go on to perform, as a vital part of its theory of *asakta karman*, the same kind of deconstruction of agency (3:27-29; 5:8-9, 14; 18:59-61) as the modern biologist. In the latter case this deconstruction results in our conventional moral (and thus *loka*-sustaining) notions being exploded, or at least fundamentally shifted from being descriptive terms to being rhetorical ones, a shift which in all probability they cannot bear.<sup>21</sup> In the *Bhagavadgītā* the deconstruction of agency follows the introduction of a similar conventional notion, *yajña*, which likewise must shift its connotation if it is to do duty in the new context.

It is clear that the *Bhagavadgītā* wishes to use the word *yajña* in a special way. By stating that only *yajña* action does not bind, the text certainly does not mean to suggest that those desirous of *mokṣa* should remain motionless except when engaged in traditional ritual actions. Rather, *yajña* is intended to suggest an axiomatic and

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<sup>21</sup> Hence the popular and media response to genetic determinism as pernicious to morality. Genetic determinism is pernicious to morality because morality continues to rest on the legalistic view that a human being, except in certain special cases, may furnish a relevant sufficient explanation of its own behaviour. The popular response to the new biology can fruitfully be compared with the

continuous attitude of mind. But how are we to approach an understanding of this attitude? The Vedic *yajña* of food oblations had developed a functional theory of environmental reciprocity by the time of the Brāhmaṇas (see below, 4.2), and the first mention of *yajña* by the *Bhagavadgītā* (3:10-16) expounds this theory in an unreconstructed form, suggesting that the distinctive nature of *yajña* is based on the actions with which it is correlated, such actions as sustain the cosmos. However, the text, in expounding *asakta karman*, now wants to redefine *yajña* as an attitude with a distinctive psychological timbre which occurs whenever action is not generating *karmabandha*. This allows the application of the term *yajña* to activities that do not obviously sustain, such as at 4:25-33. The types of activity there mentioned as *yajña* are not theorised in terms of world-sustenance, but seem instead to be a variety of ritual activities, be they ascetic, *yogic*, gnostic, or, as may be suggested by 4:25cd, non-physical versions of Vedic rituals (see next section below). All the text is giving us is a list of activities that are *yajña* and therefore do not cause *karmabandha*. The longer this list is, the more plausible is Kṛṣṇa's assertion that *karmabandha* is avoidable even though action is not. That is all. The pursuit of freedom from *karmabandha* would thus depend on finding out from Kṛṣṇa which activities are *yajña* in the new sense and which are not, since no guide has been given whereby one could decide from first principles, when faced with the possibility of a new action, whether or not it would cause bondage. The sections on *yajña* in chapters three and four of the *Bhagavadgītā* thus contain incommensurable accounts of what *yajña* is,<sup>22</sup> an eventuality which frustrates the text's ostensible use of the term as a philosophically explanatory one. In explanation of this state of affairs, it may once more be suggested that we are dealing with a composite text: a philosophy of radically demotivated action has been interrupted by the editors' introduction of a pseudo-motivator, *lokasaṃgraha*, to ideologically protect the public intelligibility of deliberate action in a context where the traditional ethic no longer worked.

#### 4.2. The social history of ritual activity

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*Mahābhārata*'s caricaturing the fatalist Dhṛtarāṣṭra as morally negligent.

<sup>22</sup> As well as the passages in chapters three and four already mentioned, *yajña* features at 5:29 (Kṛṣṇa is the recipient of all *yajñas*), 8:28 (the *yogin* transcends the attainments of the ritually correct), 9:16 (Kṛṣṇa is the *yajña*), 9:20 (as at 8:28), 10:25 (of *yajñas* Kṛṣṇa is the *japayajña*, a ritual of private recitation much eulogised in the *Mahābhārata*), 16:1 (*yajña* is one of the qualities of those with celestial (*daiva*) blessings / destinies (*sampads*), 17:11-13 (different approaches to *yajña*, extolled amongst which is that which recognises its cosmic necessity), 17:23-27 (*yajña* should be performed by those wishing for *mokṣa*, without desire for its *phala*) and 18:3, 5 (*yajña* is not to be renounced). Interestingly, though the *Bhagavadgītā* has quite some contempt for acquisitory ritualism (see especially 2:42-46), it never describes this ritualism as *yajña*.

New theorisations of *yajña* had been a factor in Vedic thought long before the *Bhagavadgītā* added its interpretation. The original Vedic community<sup>23</sup> was an eastwards-migrating, overwhelmingly pastoral group of tribes who called themselves *āryas* (Olivelle 1996:xxv-xxvi). The Kuru-Pañcāla peoples located around the *dōāb* of the Ganges and the Yamuna constituted an amalgam of the old Vedic tribes with various other cultures (Thapar 1984:21-69). Their economy was based upon the cow, raiding being an important source of herds and other booty. It would appear that *yajña* began as a socio-economic institution centred on the distribution of newly won wealth according to a shifting status hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> This institution was essentially one of interaction and negotiation between different family or tribal units, and so would have been increasingly important as populations grew: the *Rgveda* is scathing of those who do not perform *yajña* (Potdar 1953:172, 191). It was also a means of dealing with economic surplus through destruction by fire: the destruction of wealth can be understood as originating in a traditionally nomadic people whose non-essential possessions would have had to be kept at a minimum. According to Thapar (1984:66) ‘the burning of wealth was part of what might be called a prestige economy’, and was also ‘a subtle means of preventing the *yajamāna* from amassing excessive wealth’ (p. 58). The effectiveness of this *yajña* as a functioning political form seems to have decreased steadily after the settlement of these peoples. Agriculture was incorporated as a significant and eventually dominant factor in economic life, economic surplus was employed to produce luxury goods and led to the development of trade, and the complex society thus created stood in need of more stable forms of regulation than the volatile *yajña*. Rather than being discarded, the *yajña*, which after all had been constitutive of the socio-economic order and had created a profession for *brāhmaṇas* as its high-status specialists, was re-theorised by those specialists and applied in a modified form in the new context.<sup>25</sup> This re-theorisation was by no means uniform:

<sup>23</sup> All three of these words are approximations: the Vedas certainly did not reach the form in which we now have them until much later, but it seems likely that the techniques of exact memorisation of oral texts came from this Indo-European source.

<sup>24</sup> See Heesterman 1985, 1993. See also Held 1935:243-293, who approaches his study of the *Mahābhārata* from an ethnological viewpoint and compares elements of ancient Indian ritual practice to the potlatch.

<sup>25</sup> There is no need to portray the *brāhmaṇas* as disingenuous or overly self-interested in this process, as some scholars (Bazaz 1975, Chattopadhyaya 1959) may seem to do. The *brāhmaṇa* ‘would take over and supplement with his own ritual the priestly tasks for a guild caste or even a tribal caste’ (Kosambi 1965:168), but he (and these scholars too, perhaps) may have been responding to popular demand as much as anything else.



different *brāhmaṇa* families, operating in different localities, followed different agendas. Three main lines of development can be identified: the rise of the domestic (*grhya*) ritual, the incorporation of agricultural motifs into the *yajña* ideology, and the interiorisation of the *yajña* as referred to above in connection with 4:25cd.

The domestic ritual centred around the micro-social context of the householder and the smooth running of his household, conceived by Thapar (p. 37) as 'the unit of agricultural production'. The 'prestige' aspect of *yajña* could be preserved here in terms of individual householders vying for status by inviting each other to expensive ritual events:<sup>26</sup> *aiśvarya* (supremacy), denounced by the *Bhagavadgītā* at 2:42-43, could refer to this type of motive. Royal ceremonies such as the *aśvamedha*, which were still being performed in the medieval period, are the upper limit of this status-play. Significantly, Aśoka, at the helm of the large, centralised Maurya empire, discouraged the holding of festivals (Thapar 1961:250), which would have been symptomatic of the survival of old local political traditions.

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.6.1:1-8) records the shift of the economy in favour of agriculture, describing how the seasons were allotted a share in the *yajña*, ending the agricultural monopoly of the *asuras*.<sup>27</sup> The incorporation of agricultural rituals into the purview of the Vedic *yajña*, with the idea that vegetation depends on *yajña* activity, was an economic particularisation of the general and more ancient belief that *yajña* was constitutive of the regularity of the universe in all its important aspects. Certainly, as we have seen, the social order was constituted by *yajña*. Kuiper (1983:156) has suggested that 'the oldest nucleus of the *Ṛgveda* was a textbook for the new year ritual', in which the very existence of the new year depended on correct ritual activity conceived as a necessary re-enactment of Indra's cosmogonic defeat of Vṛtra. By the time of *Ṛgveda* 10.90 the foundation of the cosmos itself was being referred to as the *yajña* of the gods, human *yajña* activity being a secondary re-enactment necessary for the continuing operation of the cosmos so founded.<sup>28</sup> In the context of agricultural activity, which is

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<sup>26</sup> Potdar 1953:192: 'it appears that patrons used to vie with each other in giving gifts to the priests and in general celebrating the performance on a generous scale, as that came to be considered to be the measure of reputation at the time'. This kind of activity is noticeable in modern European society too: many society weddings are potlatch-esque. With the settlement of the raiding pastoralists, the old *yajña* was no longer the staple economic form, and it was possible to be more self-sufficient.

<sup>27</sup> The *asuras*, though often viewed as a group of demonic beings, have been identified with the non-*ārya* peoples of India. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6.8.1:1 certainly seems to identify the *devas* as itinerant and the *asuras* as settled. See Chattopadhyaya 1959:54-58. For an alternative view, see van Buitenen 1975:6-9.

<sup>28</sup> The situation here is identical to that of the *Enuma Elish* described by Alter 1981:29: 'man in the Akkadian verse-narrative is merely an object acted upon, his sole reason for existence to supply the

critically dependent upon the cosmic powers of the weather, there emerged specific explanations of how human *yajña* was the root cause of agricultural and human productivity.<sup>29</sup> Such explanations are to be found in various places: *Bhagavadgītā* 3:10-14 mirrors sentiments expressed in the *Rgveda*, in *Manusmṛti*, and, repeatedly, in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*,<sup>30</sup> about the necessity of *yajña* for the production of rain. The monsoon rains would have been a natural focus for agricultural ritual theory. 3:10-14 clearly refers to the immolatory ritual process: no internalised *yajña* could produce rain in this way.

The cosmic claims made for *yajña* are of course utterly spurious. Nonetheless, *yajña* was the ideological source of the economic and social position both of the *āryas*, from whose tradition it derived, and, more particularly, of the *brāhmaṇas*. Thus, in a society expanding to include more and more ideologically disparate communities, the *Bhagavadgītā* makes a claim for the Vedic tradition to set the agenda and define the terms within which a new social order may emerge. The *āryas*, having developed an expertise in cultural domination during their erstwhile migrations, were determined to exercise that expertise in as wide a context as was available.<sup>31</sup> Hence the *yajña* section in chapter three of the *Bhagavadgītā* asserts that the very productivity of the earth depends on the recognition of the authority of the Vedas and thus, presumably, of the *brāhmaṇas* their guardians (3:14-15).<sup>32</sup> So convincing and successful was this assertion, in historical fact, that the authority of the Vedas and the *brāhmaṇas* has been practically

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material wants of the gods. Humanity is conceived here exclusively in terms of ritual function –man is made in order to offer sacrifices to the gods'.

<sup>29</sup> The close association of human and agricultural fertility is demonstrated by Chattopadhyaya 1959:286-292.

<sup>30</sup> *Rgveda* 1.164:51: 'This same water [goes] up and down by days. The rain clouds refresh the earth: the fires refresh the sky'. *Manusmṛti* 3:76: 'An invocation cast correctly into fire approaches the sun. From the sun rain is born; from rain, food; and thence offspring'. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 7.4.2:22: 'These two worlds discharge semen. This one discharges semen upwards from here [as] smoke. There above, it becomes rain. Thereupon that [other world discharges] the rain for this one through the intermediate region. Thus offspring are born in these two semen-discharging worlds'. See also *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.7.1:18 and 11.6.2.6-10. Tull 1989:6 says that 'this notion may have originated outside the Vedic sphere', but he also correctly acknowledges that non-*ārya* elements were incorporated into the Vedic world very early on.

<sup>31</sup> Such is the impression one receives from the texts. It is important to remember that the surviving texts from this period were created or edited either by *brāhmaṇas* or by explicitly anti-*brāhmaṇical* groups: all are certainly biased. The temptation simplistically to equate the world of *brāhmaṇical* texts with a historical social reality should be avoided.

<sup>32</sup> This, at least, is Śaṅkara's interpretation of these verses (Sastri 1977:101). In any case, despite Kṛṣṇa's criticism of acquisitionistic Vedism criticised at 2:42-43, and despite his claim that Vedism alone will not facilitate *mokṣa* (8:28, 9:20-21), the *Bhagavadgītā* explicitly supports the Vedic-*brāhmaṇical* tradition as authoritative for safeguarding the operations of the world. 6:1 supports the fire ritual, 3:8 and 18:7, 9 and 23 stress the necessity of performing action which is *niyata* (enjoined), and 17:11 and 24 invoke the Vedic *vidhi* and *vidhāna* (injunction).

pan-Indian for over a millennium. Accordingly it is often overlooked that until quite soon before this came to be the case, their authority and influence was limited to a small geographical area.

We have seen that chapter three of the *Bhagavadgītā* encourages the performance of the traditional fire *yajña*, and that chapter four's section on *yajña* defines a host of different activities as *yajña*, most of which have absolutely no connection with *yajña* as mentioned heretofore. We could try to imagine that such activities were rituals considered indispensable and sustaining by those performing them, and were thus categorised in Vedic terms as *yajña* for want of any alternative: we cannot know this to be the case, however, since our textual acquaintance with these activities only occurs after they have been assimilated to the *yajña* concept, for which such predicates as 'indispensable' and 'sustaining' are tautological. However, it is difficult to see how the activities described as *yajña* in chapter four could be thought necessary for the sustenance of the world: they appear to be, in the main, *yogic* and ascetic activities of the kind more usually associated with *mokṣa* than with *lokasamgraha*. Tilak (1936:958) notes that,

'considering the matter from the historical point of view, it can be seen that when the sacrifice of wealth of various kinds prescribed in the *śruti* texts for propitiating Indra, Varuṇa and other deities fell into disuse, and the devices of attaining the state of the *parameśvara* by *Pātāñjala-yoga*, *saṃnyāsa* or metaphysical knowledge came more and more into vogue, the meaning of the word *yajña* was widened, and it was made to symbolically include all the various devices of obtaining release'.

It seems likely that the widening of the term *yajña* to include these new activities was due to interaction with peoples for whom such activities were traditional.<sup>33</sup> This idea goes against the thinking of Heesterman, whose tendency is to interpret Hindu developments in terms of the internal evolution of the Vedic tradition. Whilst he convincingly shows that the Vedic textual tradition bears witness to many different stages in the evolution of ritual activity, he is reluctant to attribute the change from one stage to the next to anything other than internal necessity, that is, to a justifiable dissatisfaction with prevailing ritual logic. At no point does he hypothesise cultural cross-fertilisation in the wake of migration, trade or technological advance. This is a strange omission: Zimmer (1951:378-381), for example, seems instinctively to see

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<sup>33</sup> There would also have been hybrid practices quickly springing up in the new context. Knowledge and recitation of sections of the Vedas, previously the preserve of *brāhmaṇa* ritual specialists, became popular and can be seen as an indicator of *brāhmaṇisation* / Sanskritisation. Extravagant claims are made for such *japayajña*. Heesterman 1978:91 alludes to *Viṣṇusmṛti* 55.20:21: 'the recitation of the Vedas vastly outweighs the performance of both *śrauta* and *grhya* sacrifices'. *Mahābhārata* 12.189-193 contains an attempt mythically to redress this inequality.

Hinduism as a product of cultural hybridity. It is to be noted, however, that if those activities newly categorised as *yajña* were traditions from various cultures, this is not to say, as Tilak does, that they were necessarily used in those cultures as means of obtaining *mokṣa*. This use could be contemporaneous with their appropriation as *yajña*. Ascetic and *yogic* techniques were used from the earliest times as means of obtaining powers of various kinds in shamanic cultures, and the rise of a *mokṣa* soteriology would allow a continuity of practice whilst removing the mundane application of the powers traditionally so generated. Patañjali's *Yogasūtras* 3:37-54 describe some of the amazing powers known to derive from *yogic* discipline, stressing (*sūtra* 51) that *kaivalya* comes through renouncing their application. The forms of ritual practice persist through radical changes in the practice's interpretation and application (Staal 1989).

As regards the *Bhagavadgītā*'s philosophy, it would be satisfying to identify something that these activities have in common apart from having been characterised as *yajña* in the text. If the reason why they have been so characterised is socio-political, then all they need have in common is that they are important activities of non-Vedic communities through appropriation of which the *brāhmaṇisation* of those communities might be facilitated. Of course, this is utterly unhelpful as far as understanding *asaṅga karman* is concerned, but this is to be expected: once we begin to explain the text in terms of its socio-political function, it need only display such philosophical integrity as is required in order for it to successfully discharge that function.

The text's ritual purpose is thus twofold. Firstly, to affirm the necessity of carrying out one's *niyata karman*, prescribed or established action: prescribed or established, that is, by Vedic injunction. Negligence in this regard will set an example likely to lead to the end of the world as currently known. Secondly, to conceptualise a host of differing ritual techniques under the rubric of *yajña*. This move is entirely natural in the context of an increasingly cosmopolitan culture: the power which *yajña* actions were known to have was abstracted from the particular Vedic rites and seen as something which might be actualised in other activities too. However, since the activities mentioned in 4:25-30 do not sustain the world, and nor are they presented as if they do, we are forced to conclude that what *yogic yajña* and fire *yajña* have in common is, not *lokasaṅgraha*, but that they are activities particularly suitable for those intent on avoiding *karmabandha*.

In this way, the text in its treatment of *yajña* wants to combine two explicit ambitions: the orderly functioning of the environment for the physical welfare and

prosperity of the human race, and the release of individual souls from *samsāra*. These correspond to the two types of soteriology discussed above, 3.3, the *pitryāna* and the *devayāna*, associated with the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śramaṇas* respectively. The tension between these two is extreme: they have opposing attitudes to the value of being alive, and their aims are so at odds with each other that no satisfactory philosophical resolution is possible. Although the idea of *asakta karman* represents the most comprehensive attempt at a resolution to date, in effect the intractability of the dilemma was shown by the splitting up of the ideal Hindu life into distinct phases by means of the *āśrama* schematisation, according to which the two soteriological ambitions were pursued in series rather than in parallel (Olivelle 1993). As far as the *Bhagavadgītā* is concerned, the philosophical tension is eased to some extent by the text's literary qualities. Because of the nature of its example (see above, 3.4), the text appears at first reading to have successfully negotiated two such different soteriologies. If, unlike Arjuna's, the action in question were one that we would imagine leading to unproblematically positive short-term consequences, then the sleight of hand would not be possible in the same way. So, in the example given at 9:20-21 of the Vedic Soma-drinkers who, though delighted by the short-term consequences of their actions, are thwarted in the long run because they have to return to the world of mortals, it is no longer possible to unify the two soteriological goals: accordingly, it is no surprise that by this point Kṛṣṇa has apparently forgotten about Arjuna's fears for his short-term welfare and is talking instead about how he might escape from *samsāra*. The solution through psychological focus will not work philosophically. Likewise the text's idea of *lokasaṃgraha* is only an apparent unification of the two soteriological poles: since *lokasaṃgraha* is the key to *asakta karman*, it must be pursued by those seeking escape from rebirth, who then incidentally aid the purpose of those who might see *lokasaṃgraha* as an end in itself. Everyone can work together at their ritual duties, whichever soteriology they favour. But we have shown that, even if the text does not object to different people having different aims in view, what it has in view, that is, *asakta karman*, cannot be properly described in terms of any possible aim.

#### 4.3. Ritual metaphor in the *Mahābhārata* and the totalisation of behavioural precepts

Having opened up the idea of *yajña* beyond the ritual sphere, the text is able to use ritual imagery and symbolism in its description of types of sustaining action that the Vedic ritual community had perhaps not conceived in such a way before. We have already

noted this process in the economic transition from pastoralism to agriculture. The *Mahābhārata*, whose narrative may have originated in relatively non-Vedic or even pre-Vedic cultures, has also been subject to a ritually inspired re-theorisation. The war, which effectively rids the world of a certain type of mischief at great cost, is conceived by the text as a *yajña*.<sup>34</sup> The *lokasaṃgraha* model for the justification of ritual action, which the *Bhagavadgītā* applies to fire *yajña* at 3:14, is implicitly applied to the war in the first five books of the *Mahābhārata*. The *Udyogaparvan*, in particular, repeatedly justifies the coming war as something that is to be avoided if possible but that eventually is necessary in order to prevent the Kauravas from disrupting the balance of the socio-political world. Jarāsaṃdha's legendary imprisonment of one hundred kings stands as the prototype of the Kauravas' evil ambition,<sup>35</sup> that is, the confiscation of land and the removal of the provisional autonomy of local rulers, and the war efforts of the Pāṇḍava allies are presented in terms of the preservation of the *dharmic* order of the world.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, although the defeat of Jarāsaṃdha is in line with Kṛṣṇa's and the Pāṇḍavas' political vision of local autonomy (see below, 6.1), the textual justification of the Pāṇḍavas' war efforts in terms of social justice is rather muted. Instead, the immediate reason for going to war against Jarāsaṃdha is to win enough influence to justify performing the *rājasūya* ritual (*Mahābhārata* 2.12-15), and the reason for going to war against the Kauravas is not that they are bad rulers, but that they have treated the Pāṇḍavas unjustly, assaulted Draupadī, and broken their promises. The kind of humanistic utilitarianism which we would relate to is not to be found in the text. From

<sup>34</sup> See Johnson (1998:xxxv-xli). The antiquity of this textual strategy is debated. This issue has already been dealt with below, 2.5, as 'the text's mythic self-deconstruction', and is peripheral to the philosophical concerns of this thesis.

<sup>35</sup> *Mahābhārata* 2.13-22: see especially 2.20:6-24. Vassilkov 1995 points out parallels between the Pāṇḍavas defeating Jarāsaṃdha to rescue the imprisoned kings, and Indra defeating Vṛtra to release the waters (*Rgveda* 1.80).

<sup>36</sup> A logical problem arises with *dharma* because the word applies to the hypothetical ideal state and behaviours of things as well as to certain behaviours that are only necessary because of the *dharmic* negligence of others. If everything and everybody was *dharmic*, then many of the behaviours that we currently observe to be *dharmic* would not be necessary. The radical disjunction of ideal and actual *dharma*s explains the rhetorical utility of the term, but renders it philosophically uncanny. Further, the intelligibility of the ideal is threatened by the notion of *dharma* as a natural predisposition or descriptive attribute: it is Duryodhana's *dharma*, in some way, to be *adharmic*, and likewise it is Arjuna's. At the beginning of the *Bhagavadgītā* Arjuna understands that it is *dharmic* to kill his relatives and *gurus*: what he does not understand is how it can happen not to be *adharmic* to do such a thing. The text in fact is in a bind, because the sense of *dharma* is on the one hand a naturalistic, descriptive sense, and thus essentially passive, and on the other is the sense of that which is to be striven after and conformed to, actively, for fear of some kind of failure or shortfall. This inner tension which *dharma* has, that one must make sure one does not fail to do that which, apparently, and by way of justification, one will naturally do anyway, is pointed out by Pollock 1985 in the context of Śāstra literature, and parallels the tension between *daiva* and *puruṣakāra* in the *Mahābhārata*, as will be discussed below, 5.7.

the text's perspective, the *dharma* of warriors is not to be justified or derived from any other set of considerations: it is absolute, a law of nature. Nonetheless, this *dharma* is concerned with maintaining the order of the world, even if this world is the micro-context of personal relations rather than the macro-context of political ones,<sup>37</sup> and thus it is natural that the war should be portrayed as a *yajña*. This portrayal is the context of many of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s *double entendres*. When the text talks about *karman* it is providing a ritual theory which can do duty for Vedicly ordained *yajña*; more generally, for all action, conceived as *yajña* and undertaken *asakta*; and, specifically, for Arjuna's engagement in this war as a *yajña*.

By suggesting a methodology of *āsakta karman*, which is presented as applicable to all action, Kṛṣṇa moves beyond the war and focuses on active life in general. *Yajña* is applied in this context too: *Manusmṛti* 8:306 explains, in the case of kings, that protection of subjects through the exercise of justice is an efficacious virtual *yajña*, and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.17 suggests that the process of leading a decent, progeny-producing life is the performance of a kind of *yajña*. This last passage has often been compared to the *Bhagavadgītā* since this idea is said (3.17:6) to have been taught to Kṛṣṇa son-of-Devakī (Devakī is also Kṛṣṇa's mother in the *Mahābhārata*: see Preciado-Solis 1984). The similarity extends beyond matters of nomenclature, since the effect of *Bhagavadgītā* 3:9ab and 4:23cd is that, to avoid *karmabandha*, all actions performed must be *yajña*. At this level of interpretation *yajña* becomes *bhakti*: just as Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* can encompass all and any action (9:26-28b), the application of the term *yajña* to all the actions performed by a person is indicative of an internal attitude which renders all those actions 'correct'. From this internal viewpoint, the dualism of correct and incorrect action coincides exactly with the dualism of actual and hypothetical events, and determinism has been accepted by implication. The whole-life *yajña* is tellingly connected by *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.17:7 to the post-mortem passage to the sun, that is, to the avoidance of rebirth: in this it outstrips any specific *yajña* performed correctly but without higher knowledge.

By expanding the locus of *yajña* and introducing the idea of the *asakta* actor who only acts for purposes of *yajña*, the text assimilates both *dharma* and *yajña* to *lokasamgraha*: the imperative aspect of both *dharma* and *yajña* is only understandable in terms of a vision of how the world must organise itself if it is to sustain prospering

<sup>37</sup> It is a moot point whether there is any real difference between these contexts, even today: from the viewpoint of one of very few powerful families, even the apparent difference disappears.

humans. In the case of those aspects of *lokasaṃgraha* that are controlled by Vedic ritual, the Vedic ordinances constitute such a vision. With *yajña* now applicable to a host of activities, this vision must accordingly be expanded. The necessity for this is extreme: the only reason that Vedic ritual can serve as the prototype for *asakta* action is because such ritual action can be engaged in without anxiety, in total confidence that it is both necessary and sufficient to sustain the operation of the cosmos. This confidence can only be extended to action in general on condition that there be for all actions, as there is for Vedic ritual actions, an authoritative blueprint of a stable, immutable, all-benefiting order which is built into the fabric of things. This explains the huge array of Dharmaśāstras which emerged at around the same time as the *Mahābhārata* and which codified and normalised human behaviour to an astonishing level of detail. As Heesterman says (1978:81-83), 'the Vedas contain no positive injunctions that could be used directly as rules of conduct'. The genre of rules and injunctions is nonetheless Vedic, this circumstance being an outcome of the process of Sanskritisation, the incorporation of a wealth of *smṛti* texts under an 'expanded use' of the authority-totem Veda. With the evolution of the insulated (or, at least, unproblematically dominant) Vedic community into a more cosmopolitan society, social norms were now under threat from other ways of life: the community (and other communities) would only at this stage become conscious of many of its own traditions. In this situation, knowledge of normative behaviour was required in order that one be able to discharge actions without fear that one has somehow done the wrong thing: without a normative background it is incumbent upon the individual to decide what ought to be done, and the limited perspective that such an individual must base this decision upon precipitates an existential crisis involving desire, anger and *duḥkha*. The crisis is all the more severe if many of these decisions are the kind that, until recently, did not have to be made because a certain line of action was taken for granted, or because the situations demanding them (internecine wars, for example) simply did not arise.<sup>38</sup> Hence the *Bhagavadgītā*, in expanding the concept of *yajña*, supplements the primordial justification of Vedic *yajña* (3:10: Prajāpati of old instituted it) with a similar primordial justification of the fourfold division of human tasks (4:13ab: 'The *varṇas* were emitted by me, divided in their *karmans* and *guṇas*')<sup>39</sup> and with the insistence that the Śāstra be

<sup>38</sup> Heesterman 1978:84: 'In order [for *smṛti*] to fulfil its task of giving guidelines for society it has to take into account the exigencies of normal life as well as the various, often conflicting customs and usages of many and varied communities, ranging from tribals to sophisticated urbanites and from socially active men to solitary hermits'.



followed as a guide to action:

‘Whoever throws away the injunction of Śāstra and behaves according to desire does not attain perfection, nor happiness, nor the highest way. Therefore the Śāstra is your standard with respect to the to-be-done and the not-to-be-done: you should know the spoken precepts of the Śāstra and do action in this world’ (16:23-24).

Here the text mentions only one alternative to learning what one’s task is from an authoritative external source: being thrown into crisis at the mercy of one’s desires. But the text does not fully appreciate the consequences of this line of argument: to preclude trauma the Śāstra must be totally consistent, and exhaustive of all meaningful dilemmas. That this is not true is in fact the starting point of the *Bhagavadgītā*: Arjuna, trying his best to let the Śāstra be his guide (*i.e.* thinking about what he has repeatedly heard, 1:44d), has received contradictory guidance and is thus thrown upon his own resources with disabling effect. What does the *Bhagavadgītā* offer as an addition to the Śāstra in case it fails? The guarantee that Kṛṣṇa has antecedently endorsed one particular line of action and that that line of action, ultimately, will ensue (18:60-61). That is all very well, but how are we to know which it is? The invitation to offer all actions to the Lord, knowing that he is their author and the only true recipient of their benefits, that is, the attitude of *bhakti*, is not really an answer to the question of what to do: *bhakti* suggests that we do not ask the question in the first place, which is easier than un-asking it once it has been asked. The psychological pressure and the existential crisis remain the same, whether one is acting avariciously to ensure one’s own benefit, or trying to bring the will of the Lord to fruition on earth.<sup>40</sup> Either way, one does as one sees fit, and the trauma comes from feeling that one may be wrong about what is fit. If the philosophy of *bhakti* is to solve this, it must state that incorrect action is in principle impossible, and that, whatever we do, we do the Lord’s will. The text does imply this very strongly in places, as will be seen in the sequel, but it also denies it. There are many examples of this denial. Kṛṣṇa’s first response to Arjuna’s dismay is to muster arguments to show him that not to fight would be incorrect; ascetic action at the expense of ritual action is incorrect; ritual actions performed in the wrong spirit are incorrect; the duties of a *varṇa* of which one is not a member are incorrect; actions contrary to those of the Śāstras are incorrect; and so on. The text gives us good reason to fear that we will err. To this

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<sup>39</sup> 18:41-44 describes the differential tasks of the four *varṇas*. 18:47 emphasises the danger of trying to fulfil the *dharma* of another, and in many ways the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative dramatises this danger: see above, 2.3.

<sup>40</sup> Some would say that adopting the first of these understandings makes things easier existentially. Whether or not this holds, there is enough similarity to make my point.

extent it presents no solution to Arjuna's crisis, which is one of fear that he will err.<sup>41</sup> The text is in a bind again: it does indeed have a solution to Arjuna's crisis, that of suggesting that incorrect action is impossible, that choice and responsibility are illusory, and that no justification of any line of action should be imagined, but this thoroughly philosophical solution is at cross-purposes to the *Mahābhārata*'s social project, which is to encourage society to develop in a certain way. If sacred texts embody social projects, and find that stressing the individual responsibility of hearers and readers facilitates those projects, then the deterministic solution to Arjuna's crisis, which we are glimpsing here, is unlikely to appear in a sacred text except in a heavily disguised form. Accordingly, this solution is disguised in the *Bhagavadgītā*. The scholarly removal of the disguise, which will proceed in earnest in the next chapter, may seem to do violence to the integrity of the tradition which has kept the text, but nonetheless such a removal can be quite easily defended. After all, the presence of the disguise is a result of particular historical contingencies that cannot be reconstructed in enough detail for us to fully understand them; yet that which is thus disguised does seem to be a genuinely philosophical response to a widespread human problem.

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<sup>41</sup> Sarma, quoted by Agarwal 1993:351, appreciates this problem: '*karmayoga* is only the method of our work. It lays down only the manner in which we should discharge our duties. But what are our duties, what constitutes their content and substance?'

This chapter is dedicated to an exploration of determinism in the text. The first section is introductory: it takes up once more the ontological realism established in the final section of chapter two, and shows that the text depends upon this realism and justifies it in terms of praxis. I argue that the information given by Kṛṣṇa, that *prakṛti* is the sole actor, is the cornerstone of *asakta karman*. The second section analyses *svabhāva* and *aḥamkāra*, concepts essential to the text's deconstruction of agency, and looks at the idea of determinism as presented by various characters of the *Mahābhārata*. I show that this idea, known as the *kālavāda*, is integral to the Epic as a whole, as well as to certain modern understandings of behaviour.

The third, fourth and fifth sections of the chapter survey the ways in which the idea of determinism conflicts with linguistic and psychological conventions. Section three argues that the deterministic viewpoint undoes the ideas of choice, possibility and probability. Within such a viewpoint, the status of intentions and perceived motivations as causes of behaviour is purely hypothetical, since there is no reason to suppose that a creature will know enough fully to explain its own behaviour. Further, such mental occurring hypothetical causes are themselves causally determined events. Section four transposes these ideas back into the context of the text's creation, and shows that determinism is anathema to the purposes of the text's creators, who were concerned with trying to encourage certain types of behaviour amongst large quantities of non-philosophers. I prove that the view that determinism promotes inactivity is fallacious, but that it has nonetheless led to the derogation of determinism within the text, an eventuality which can explain why the *Bhagavadgītā* has been so widely misunderstood. I also show that the idea of one's *karmic* history accounting for one's present circumstances is a socially motivated attempt to channel dissipated responsibility back onto the initial agent, this time in the form of the biographised *dehin* theorised above, 3.1. Section five broadens the discussion of determinism by arguing that the linguistic and symbolic tools at the disposal of the philosopher, which are conditioned by the facts of human spatial separation and interaction, make it almost impossible to expound determinism intelligibly. This explains why *asakta karman*, which depends upon determinism, is such a difficult idea, and why the text is forced, as discussed above, 4.1, to exemplify it in terms (*yajña*, *lokasaṃgraha*, *dharma*) which transparently do not apply.

Section six compares the determinism of the *Bhagavadgītā* with that of the *Ājīvikas*, an ancient Indian ascetic sect. The *Ājīvikas* believed that the attainment of *mokṣa* was determined, and I show that the *Bhagavadgītā*'s determinism also entails this. The contrast between the asceticism of the *Ājīvikas* and the activism of the *Bhagavadgītā*, however, underlines the problem, discussed above, 4.1, of the *asakta karmin*'s mental presentation of his or her actions, which is required if a methodology of *asakta karman* is to be provided. I show that the text's attempts to provide such a methodology are derived from ascetic traditions, but that in this they are inapt: *asakta karman* is methodologically inaccessible, and the apparent existence of a methodology within the text serves only to encourage certain types of *karman*.

The final section of the chapter investigates ways in which ideas used in the text might be interpreted in light of the determinism which has been uncovered. It begins with an exposition of *buddhi*, the psychological faculty of awareness which is the location of the non-attachment being sought. I show that the knowledge that all actions are determined and carried out by *prakṛti* will fundamentally alter the way a person presents actions to him or herself, in such a way that 'singleness of *buddhi*', which Kṛṣṇa deems necessary for *asakta karman*, might result. Next, I reinterpret the term *bhakti* such that it also indicates an attitude, of sharing one's actions with their real agent, which is derived from determinism as well as conducive to non-attachment.

### 5.1. *Jñāna*: the factual basis of *asakta karman*

Many *Bhagavadgītā* commentators have interpreted the text as teaching three different (spiritual / religious) paths, of *karma*, *jñāna* and *bhakti*. There has been much debate about whether all or just one or two of these paths are said to lead to the highest goal, and about what the text means by distinguishing them. Are they mutually incompatible? Is each appropriate only for a certain type of person? And so on. This debate is summarised by A. Sharma (1986:xxii-xxvi): see 2.2 above. The present section will view *jñāna* not as a religious or spiritual path of insight separable from devotion, moral activity or any other path, nor as the liberating mystical knowledge of *brahman-ātman*, but as a fundamental aspect of Kṛṣṇa's speech-act to Arjuna: *jñāna* is the information content of Kṛṣṇa's words, the new knowledge that certain things are the case. The new perspective on the war which Arjuna is given, and which enables him to go ahead with it, is derived from new information. All of the three paths mentioned above depend in

equal measure on this information.

The text clearly has the form of Arjuna being informed, by an incorrigible authority, of various subtle pieces of information which, as its exposition demonstrates, have far reaching consequences for a person's understanding of their own mental and physical activity, and hence for the resulting quality of their experience. The dependence of success, effectiveness, and satisfaction on a reasonable match between 'how things are' and 'how things are currently known to be' is an axiom of the text's purpose: success achieved in the absence of correct understanding is shown to be short-lived and precarious. The necessity for authority in the one providing the correct understanding is therefore acute. There is a congruence between the kind of information that Kṛṣṇa provides, and the authority which he assumes (he is the supreme Lord, creator and destroyer of all worlds, the self that dwells in all beings, *etc.*), for it is, as he explains, the kind of information that human beings are constitutionally inept at discovering for themselves. Arjuna's horror, when faced with the war, is commensurate with his understanding of himself and his situation, but he has reached the point of questioning whether his orientation is the most satisfactory one available. The *Bhagavadgītā*'s analysis of the *sakta* actor's psychology (for example 3:27-29, 36-41) shows that *kāma* and *krodha* (desire and anger) result from the natural interaction between *indriyas* and *indriyārthas* (sense-faculties and their objects), and suggests that the truths revealed by Kṛṣṇa are not ordinarily discoverable. The text refers to ascetics capable of discerning this kind of information for themselves without the assistance of divine revelation, but it clearly states that such folk do not see the whole picture: their philosophy, like their method, is anthropocentric and fails to realise the *raison d'être* of the material world (7:1-14). The information given to Arjuna is acknowledged by the text to be extremely special, normally inaccessible to humans. Its inaccessibility to humans is empirical and contingent rather than logical or necessary.

There is here a notion of truth, the pristine state of things as an absolute. As a human concept this absolute is contaminated by time and memory, and as a result there is a sense in which the present is more absolute, more fundamental than the past, and the past than the future: nonetheless we acknowledge that the universe, its history and whatever future it may have, is a given. There are things; they lie in a certain way and change, and lie again and change, and each permutation exists in all its details (most of which of course are unwitnessed) in exactly the same indisputable way as each and every other permutation. This axiom is assumed by almost all people at almost all times.

It is not difficult to understand, indeed all sane people understand it perfectly: everybody knows that the axiom is used because it is true. To explain or describe what is meant by truth here is beside the point, because even if such a thing were possible it would not communicate in any way.<sup>1</sup> What can be done to illustrate this line of thought, though, is to contrast this notion of truth or existence, comprehending as it does all past and future event, occurrence or state, with the nature of human expressions supposedly descriptive of events and occurrences. People are extremely restricted in their observations of what is happening: because no two people witness exactly the same parts of the picture, there are misunderstandings and miscommunications and conflict between accounts and interpretations. It is hard to agree on any definitive account of what is agreed on. Truth comes in the first instance through human subjectness, through experience as a private involuntary individual: the expression of it is of a different order, constrained by the evolved practicalities and discourses of language, even when one is, as it were, expressing it to oneself.

'The truth' is inexpressible; all accounts are partial and provisional. Philosophy has failed at this point: all declarations can be deconstructed and dissolved into their individual situatedness as linguistic or neurological entities, yet nonetheless it is known that all people know the same world. How is this known? In a strange way: it is presupposed in, and demonstrated by, human action. People are purposive: they learn, do, and die. So much of what people are given is the result of the toils of others before them, and all people toil in one way or another to give better than was given them. This is a general anthropological observation, but insofar as such observations are made, indeed insofar as any observations are made (particularly observations of other observations made), they constitute the knowledge that the world is one.

This realistic notion of existence as a series of precise and detailed permutations of things is presented by the *Bhagavadgītā* in terms which later on were famous elements of the *Sāṃkhya darśana*: *prakṛti*, the *guṇas*, *manas*, the *indriyas*, *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra*.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the text views the world as utterly real. In no way

<sup>1</sup> To the extent that we only live in this world, we cannot get behind its axiomatic 'isness': all we can do is to compare it with, for example, the world of our dreams, but the conclusions thus reached about the real world's 'isness' are banal and universally known. The question of how or why this world should be characterised by this kind of 'isness' is unintelligible. The two concepts 'world' and 'isness' are not separable by human beings, since bodies are ever and equally possessed of both.

<sup>2</sup> Van Buitenen 1988:53-73 understands *ahaṃkāra* as a macrocosmic rather than microcosmic subject-principle, denoting the selfconsciousness of the cosmic person and hence the creative power of formulation, the symptom of manifestation. The tendency of *Sāṃkhya* terminology to refer simultaneously to the micro- and the macrocosmos is problematic, as the suspicion remains that to

does Kṛṣṇa suggest that the battle is not really happening. It is easy to be misled by *Vedāntic* interpretations on this point: later theories of *māyā* and of *nirguṇa / saguṇa brahman* are not applicable to this text. The text does distinguish *sat* from *asat* but it uses the terms in a variety of ways. They are not always used as ontological categories, but when they are, the differentiation is in terms of changeability only: *sat* is that which must always remain as it is, *asat* that which must change and decay. There is no suggestion that *asat* is thus unreal. In fact, ordinary *parlance* would be much more likely to call *sat* unreal than *asat*: things are not ordinarily thought to be unreal just because they are impermanent. The use of the word *māyā* in the *Bhagavadgītā* serves to contrast Kṛṣṇa's perspective on the world-process with an ordinary person's, and to highlight that person's constitutional limitations on understanding the full picture. In no way does it water down the text's dynamic-realist position.

There is some tension, however, in preserving this idea of a true, objective world-and-time, when it is acknowledged that human experience witnesses only small corners of the world, and that human expression is therefore able to model the world only in extremely limited ways. No description can match up to the truth that is described. The text shows that this is a synthetic statement, for it alludes to an experience that is not situated, a complete experience of everything at once: the experience which Kṛṣṇa has, and which he briefly bestows on Arjuna. By doing this, the text can preserve the notion of the absolute truth, while simultaneously showing the human situation to be such that no representation, map or model of the truth, be it linguistic or abstract or introspective, will be true in any comparable way.

Yet a problem remains: in what sense, then, is Kṛṣṇa's 'only *prakṛti* acts' truer than the *sakta* actor 'thinking himself to be the agent'? How does Kṛṣṇa's speech contain information? If actual truth is incomparable with its representations, what is the sense of the claim that *x* is truer than *y*?

This is the problem of the philosophy of science, which ostensibly provides a description of the world, yet is continually updating and re-presenting its description.<sup>3</sup> Science, to explain what it is doing in this describing, must not only appeal to an

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concentrate on one of these poles rather than the other would be to misunderstand what *Sāṃkhya* was, but, despite Kṛṣṇa's self-descriptions, the use of these terms in the *Bhagavadgītā* is overwhelmingly focused on the case of the individual human.

<sup>3</sup> Dieks 1994:68: 'It is... rationally compelling to believe in the (approximate) truth of the best explanation, the one offered by the scientific theory we accept as the best. In other words, acceptance of a theory as explanatory implies belief in its (approximate) truth'.

objective truth to which its descriptions point, albeit strangely, but must also explain the process and context of description-giving in terms of practical human purposive activity, and justify its descriptions by appealing to their uses, the successes that result from their employment.<sup>4</sup> This is a somewhat vague line of reasoning because defining what 'success in activity' might be is open to problems. The uses to which a discovery might be put include making a task easier, getting food or shelter, or an easier life, or a more pleasant time. Yet despite the vagueness here, it is a firm human instinct to suppose that goals are shared: it is clear that persons are all the same kind of thing, however mutually bewildered.

The philosophical justification of science runs up against the problem of the *status* of the results of human curiosity. The immediate experiential justification of this curiosity, when one is in the process of being curious, is the extent to which the curiosity is satisfied. The Popperian view of scientific activity presents an ongoing series of conjectures being refuted and modified,<sup>5</sup> the assumption being that, since each subsequent conjecture is tested against the same real world, the descriptions given of that world will gradually be fuller and more accurate. But this begs the question. Since only certain types of test are possible, the accuracy attained, which can never be complete accuracy, is always hypothetical. The fuel of Popper's intuition, though, is the passing of time. Curiosity has been known to have been satisfied, and this justifies and stimulates more curiosity.<sup>6</sup> In Arjuna's case, his curiosity-formed model of the world is cracking: he acknowledges that it is unsatisfactory, since it is recommending contradictory *dharmas*, and as such he is newly curious. If Kṛṣṇa can satisfy this new curiosity with a model which works in the present predicament, as well as working retrospectively in all other known predicaments (where Arjuna's old model used to do duty), then that is as much meaning as 'x is truer than y' can have.

The analogy between the new information from Kṛṣṇa and the new information from scientific discovery should not be stretched too far, but it is suggested in the first

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<sup>4</sup> This instrumentalist line is different from Bohr's (see above, 2.6) because it maintains the idea of an exact real world, without which there is no ontological ground for folk to stand on while employing ideas and other tools.

<sup>5</sup> Popper 1969. Feyerabend's (1971) resistance to methodological and epistemological uniformity in science is not a defence of the results of science so much as an explanation of scientific activity. As such it leans, as does Kṛṣṇa, towards an experiential as opposed to a rational explanation of knowledge and truth.

<sup>6</sup> The classical humanitarian defence of science is on the basis of technological advance. It is clear, however, that technology can be put to 'bad' uses, and an ethico-philosophical Luddism has not been defeated so much as rendered irrelevant by the now pervasive acceptance that technology will be driven ever forwards by economic and commercial forces.



place by the similarity of proto-*Sāṃkhya* and physics as natural philosophies (Chattopadhyaya 1959, 1976, Riepe 1961). The information Kṛṣṇa gives contains its own explanation and justification: ‘therefore you have no cause to sorrow over any creature’ (2:30). The practical results offered by the text in defence and explanation of its new information are universally desirable. This is the difference between the results of Kṛṣṇa’s information and those of science’s: science deals with the material things we use as tools for our well-being, and there can always be doubt about whether a particular type of tool is necessary for this general task, but Kṛṣṇa’s tool proposes to effect well-being from within the mind, exposing the limits of any external tool and making all such tools unnecessary.<sup>7</sup>

If the sense of ‘x is truer than y’ is given by the use of the information, the change that could be wrought by and in a person finding out that x, then a move has been made from the logic of propositions onto the ground of human goals. The trump in Kṛṣṇa’s defence is that his goal, *sukha*, can be seen as the ground and *raison d’être* of all other, particular goals (see above, 3.4), and can moreover, being internal, be pursued alongside particular goals. One of the most attractive points of Kṛṣṇa’s information is the non-markedness, in terms of behaviour, of its acceptance: the only biographical adjustment is the reduction of trauma. This last point is initially reassuring, given the solace that is found in habits, but ultimately particular goals lose their intelligibility if *sukha* has internally been guaranteed regardless of circumstance. Hence Kṛṣṇa says that ‘seeing the highest, even one’s taste (*rasa*) ceases’ (2:59cd: in common with most other translators, I read *rasavarjaṃ* with the first half of the verse). This explains the broad and impersonal nature of *yajña* and *lokasaṃgraha*, the ‘motivations’ for *asakta karman* (see chapter four).

Kṛṣṇa’s speech uses new information as the basis of a proposed technique of action. Of course Kṛṣṇa gives much information in the text of various kinds: what is of primary importance here, in the context of the technique of *asakta karman*, is the specific information that only *prakṛti* acts, never *dehin*. Kṛṣṇa claims that to take this fact fully on board is to be *asakta* in any and all *karman*. By repeatedly describing how possession of this fact transforms the attitude to action of a hypothetical *yogin*, that is, by providing a blueprint of what it would be like to be *asakta*, Kṛṣṇa makes it clear that

<sup>7</sup> This kind of radical reorientation is called a ‘paradigm shift’ by Kuhn 1962: it is the presentation of a different kind of model, with new terms and presuppositions, for the same old world. Arjuna’s crisis of contradictory *dharmas* is parallel to the wealth of contradictory data that, according to Kuhn, prefaces the emergence of a new paradigm in the history of science.

his introduction of facts is subordinate to the use of those facts. The mechanical details of *prakṛti*'s acting, and the nature of the *dehin*, are somewhat sketchily given. Much attention is given to psychological strategies by means of which the baffling 'only *prakṛti* acts' may be incorporated into a technique to promote *sukha*. The need for particular types of strategy here is in need of explanation, which is given through an analysis of human psychology. Realising that 'only *prakṛti* acts' is not straightforward since, due to *ahaṁkāra*, the individualisation of agency which must be circumnavigated is a normal accompaniment to human life. The contradiction between normal mental practice and the information offered by Kṛṣṇa means that the text's psychological strategies for *asakta karman* are expressed in ways which seem paradoxical given the *jñāna* that has gone before. The distinction between facts, on the one hand, and techniques which follow and depend upon them, on the other, can also be seen in the text's distinction between *sāṁkhya* and *yoga* (2:39ff.), and the text reflects, as well it might, on their mysterious interrelationship (5:4ff.).<sup>8</sup>

## 5.2. The deconstruction of agency

Let us examine Kṛṣṇa's analysis of the agency in action:

'*Karmans* are being done wholly by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. The person who is bewildered by *ahaṁkāra* thinks 'I am the doer'. The knower of the truth of the distributions of *karmans* and of *guṇas*, thinking 'the *guṇas* are moving amongst the *guṇas*', does not attach him / herself' (3:27-28).

'While seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, eating, moving, breathing, sleeping, speaking, ejecting, grasping, waking and sleeping, the yoked truth-knower should think 'I am doing nothing at all', reflecting that the senses (*indriyas*) are moving amongst their objects' (5:8-9).

'Neither on earth nor again in the sky among the *devas* is there an entity which could be free from these three *guṇas* born of *prakṛti*. The *karmans* of *brāhmaṇas*, *ṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and *sūdras* are divided by the *guṇas* produced by *svabhāva*' (18:40-41).

These passages analyse occurrence, event, in terms of something wholly impersonal. *Karman* covers such events as come to pass through the active involvement, and apparent agency, of persons. The categorisation of events into *karman* and non-*karman* is natural for people, who are involved in their own *karman* in a way they are not involved in most of the events they witness.<sup>9</sup> Yet from the perspective of *tattva* ('that-

<sup>8</sup> Of course both *sāṁkhya* and *yoga* 'mean' far more than has been suggested here. Both van Buitenen 1981 and Zaehner 1969 translate them as 'theory' and 'practice' at 2:39; the former switches to 'insight' and 'practice' at 5:4.

<sup>9</sup> Some events are *my* business in a special way: 'I slam the door', but not the analogous 'she slams the door' or the impersonal 'the door slams in the wind'.

ness', translated as 'truth' in the above verses) all events are of a piece. The individual person does not add anything to the run of events by acting under his or her own mental volitions: all such volitions have sufficient external causes, after all, and it is more fitting to say that the individual person is a phenomenal part of the run of events, a contingent by-product, and to describe his or her volitional impressions as effects, rather than causes, of changing reality. Human bodies are provided by the world: equally so are the mental causes of action, and thus the actions themselves. The *Bhagavadgītā*, in its search for a hermeneutical stance on human action, has thrown off all anthropocentrism to analyse action as pure event, as motion of things. The perspective is one of physics and cosmology. It is rigidly deterministic.

This perspective is illustrated in different ways by the text. The true explanatory nexus of events, the event-potency which works through people and 'their actions', is given in different places as *prakṛti*, *brahman*, and Kṛṣṇa. In each case it is stressed that people do not make themselves act, but are made to act. Where the event-potency is indicated by the word *brahman*, to shed the delusion of agency is to 'restore *karman* to *brahman*' (4:24), to 'deliver *karmans* into *brahman*' (5:10). Hence 13:29-30: 'that person sees, who sees *karmans* being done entirely by *prakṛti*, and thus *ātman* to be a non-doer. When one perceives the various condition of beings as resting on unity, then one partakes of *brahman*'. Where the event-potency is indicated by the concept of Kṛṣṇa Almighty, to shed the delusion of agency is to 'whatever you do, or eat, or offer, or give, or mortify, make it an offering to me' (9:27), to, 'absorbed in me, resign all *karmans* to me' (12:6ab: 18:57a adds that this resignation is mental).

*Prakṛti* is the first word the text uses to express the idea of the changing, determining event-potency. There is no reason to suppose that the term '*prakṛti*' originated in soteriological contexts. On the contrary, much of the proto-*Sāṃkhya* material as it is reflected in the early Upaniṣads seems to be proto-science, natural rational philosophy, widely applicable but often focused on the human being.<sup>10</sup> The illusion of agency proceeds from the human sensory apparatus and its organisation by *manas*: *prakṛti* and the three *guṇas* provide a complete explanation of the constitution of

<sup>10</sup> See Chattopadhyaya 1959, Riepe 1961, Johnston 1937. Larson 1987:3-5 notes that the oldest sense of *sāṃkhya* is an intellectual systematising enumeration of knowledge, which only later became specifically spiritual or religious knowledge. Earlier (1969:99) he says that '*Sāṃkhya* is a derivative and composite system, a product of a wide variety of speculations from a wide variety of contexts'. Bedekar 1992 notes the connections between materialism, determinism, and the *asuras*, citing *Mahābhārata* 12.224:50 and 12.267:4, 6 as evidence. J L Brockington 1999b:477 notes that 'cosmology may have been unrelated to *Sāṃkhya* originally'.

the world and the occurrence of change and event within it.

The wholly individual matrix of imagination, experience and memory which will lead to different actions for different people in similar situations is called *svabhāva* by the *Bhagavadgītā*.<sup>11</sup> *Svabhāva* covers factors which are fixed for each person (Arjuna was born a *ksatriya*) as well as factors which are continuously added, for example through experience, and taken away, for example through maturity or loss of memory. Arjuna's *svabhāva* is affected by Kṛṣṇa's speech to such an extent that his calculation ('decision') of what to do is reversed. In the causal nexus which conditions actions, two constraints alone, the *svabhāva* of the person concerned and the situation in which they find themselves at that time, are sufficient to account for the action which follows (of course these two constraints are multiform constraint-classes rather than single factors). *Svadharmā*, as elaborated in the *smṛti* texts, is a guide to what behaviour to expect from people, based on long-term and readily identifiable aspects of their *svabhāva* such as gender, *varṇa* and stage of life. Nonetheless *svabhāva* as an explanation of a specific action must also encompass changeable short-term factors.<sup>12</sup>

Given the *indriyas-manas-buddhi* breakdown of psychological activity, it is easy to see how the illusion of agency arises. It arises primarily because the *indriyas* informing any one *manas-buddhi* complex are all attached to the same automotive body. Events involving 'my' body constitute a special subsection of events. Many are under 'my' conscious apprehension, some appear to be under 'my' conscious jurisdiction, mental processes appear to be necessary for some of them to occur: they are clearly 'mine' in some way, but the only thing that guarantees the intelligibility of this 'mine' is the constant conjunction of one specific brain with one specific body. How convenient that all these senses I have can simultaneously bring different kinds of information from the same source, namely this body and its immediate surroundings. This 'mine' breaks down if different senses are imagined to be correlated with different bodies. Perhaps I have a seventh, unnamed sense whose organs of sense are located in another creature: the sense-impressions thus created would constitute unintelligible background noise to my mental processes, which are always turned towards implications for *this* creature. The constant conjunction of brain and body is the reason for personal identity: there have been philosophical 'thought-experiments' in which this conjunction is broken

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<sup>11</sup> *Svabhāva* is mentioned at 2:7, 5:14, 8:3, 17:2, 18:41-44, 47 and 60.

<sup>12</sup> In Camus 1942, the killing of the Arab on the beach is triggered by intense heat and sunlight, as if the action depended on a person of temporarily modified *svabhāva*. Arjuna invokes this temporary aspect of *svabhāva* at 2:7a.

down, and then the sense of 'mine' must break down too.<sup>13</sup>

The *Bhagavadgītā* mentions *ahaṁkāra* sparingly,<sup>14</sup> several times in formulaic lists of *Sāṁkhya* or proto-*Sāṁkhya* 'elements of the person'.<sup>15</sup> The impression is of a negative, deluding force. At 18:59-61 *ahaṁkāra* is picked out as the reason for Arjuna's brief belief that he will not fight. Kṛṣṇa points out that since Arjuna was, in fact, because of his *prakṛti*, always going to fight, all *ahaṁkāra* has done is to furnish a sudden and demobilising fantasy based on inappropriate personal considerations, a solipsistic existential crisis with no bearing on Arjuna's actual military activity.

The common rendering of *ahaṁkāra* as 'ego' is fortuitous in that both terms call attention to the grammatical nature of the idea. It is in language that different people are marked out by different names and different parts of the verb. Because talking constitutes such a large proportion of interpersonal human activity, the differentiation in language between one person and another provides a ready-made 'I'-unit for the individual to think in terms of. When people report their behaviour in language, the 'I' that denotes a physical entity is apt to be mistaken for a metaphysical one, aloof, directorial, and with decisive agency. This mistake may then play over the whole range of imaginings that take place as a body acts and is experienced as acting by a particular brain. Reporting on actual behaviour occurs only in retrospect, but many imaginings are of future events and actions that will not, and past events and actions that have not,<sup>16</sup> taken place. Such imaginings form a natural internal aspect of the person. Insofar as language provides a vehicle for the expression of a person's imaginings and the sharing of others', it can be seen as the counterpart of the mistakenly extrapolated agent-self 'I'. The two are interdependent. Hence 'the subject is not an entity with which we can be acquainted, but is thrust upon us by the needs of grammar' (Gudmunsen 1977:74). Derrida (1973:145) traces this insight to de Saussure and quotes from him: "language [which consists only of differences] is not a function of the speaking subject". This implies that the subject (self-identical or even conscious of self-identity, self-conscious)

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<sup>13</sup> See Wiggins's brain-splitting experiments (1967). Penelhum 1970 proves the impossibility of disembodied individual post-mortem survival. Hence, for example, the philosophical necessity in Christian doctrine for the resurrection of the body: see Flew 1955. For dependence of the individual and subject upon the body, see also Strawson 1959, Ayer 1963:82-128, Grosz 1994.

<sup>14</sup> 3:27, 7:4, 13:5, 16:18, 18:17, 53, 58-59.

<sup>15</sup> '*Sāṁkhya*' means enumeration. Such lists are also characteristic of early Buddhist speculations about identity: see Hamilton 1996.

<sup>16</sup> A common aspect of memory is the imagination of what one should or might have done instead of what one did. These are not past events, but they hang on past events.

is inscribed in the language, that he is a 'function' of the language'. Althusser (1971:170-171) notes that 'even if it only appears under this name (the subject) with the rise of bourgeois ideology, above all with the rise of legal ideology,<sup>17</sup> the category of the subject (which may function under other names...) is the constitutive category of all ideology'. The 'ideological apparatus' would here be symptomatised by all types of signifying practices, including, most powerfully, linguistic and textual ones. The 'ideological apparatus' here is a moot extrapolation, but certainly the subject, the 'I'-maker, is predicated upon signification (which, I would add, with Strawson 1959, Ayer 1963:82-128 and Grosz 1994, is further predicated upon the natural integrity of human bodies). Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) show, with the aid of cross-cultural comparisons, that 'sense of self' depends on the pronominal conventions of one's language.<sup>18</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* contains a good deal of speculation about the relative potency of *daiva* (fate, destiny) and *puruṣakāra* (human effort). These are only two of the concepts to which the *Mahābhārata* has recourse during its many discussions of the causes of its events (primarily the dicing match and the Kurukṣetra war). Others include the omnipotent *dhātṛ* ('placer'), luck, *karmic* residues from previous births, time (*kāla*), and the activity of various gods.<sup>19</sup> Because the events in question are so momentous, the issue of responsibility is paramount, and the text repeatedly asks itself whether the war could have been avoided, and, if so, by what possible means (Hill 1993). The overall answer given is a negative one: even Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who often seems to be the most culpable of the characters involved, is constrained involuntarily by family ties (*Mahābhārata* 2.45:49, 2.66:27, 3.10:1-3, 5.156:4-7). These discussions often take place in a conventional, legalistic tone. It is important to note that these theories of human action do not all explicitly deny individual freedom and responsibility: they can be seen as adducing additional factors that may constrain choice and therefore reduce culpability. It is only occasionally that the notion of individual freedom is doubted in its entirety.

What is doubted, however, is the potency of the individual in the face of super-

<sup>17</sup> (Althusser's footnote:) 'Which borrowed the legal category of 'subject in law' to make an ideological notion: man is by nature a subject'.

<sup>18</sup> Mühlhäusler and Harré deem first-person pronominality to have 'some claim to universality' (p. 106): thus, despite the differences between the pronominal systems of English and Sanskrit, *aḥam* is unproblematically translated by 'I'.

<sup>19</sup> See Hopkins 1901:103-104 for a brief survey of these hypothetical causes, Long 1980 and Hill 1989 for more in-depth ones.

personal forces. It is emphasised that, even having done all within one's power to achieve *x, y* may still happen instead. This frustrating but ever present fact is the axis around which the *Mahābhārata*, *qua* tragedy, revolves. The debate is one about the extent of constraints, but these are constraints on outcomes of activity, not on what one does or tries to do. Kṛṣṇa has much sympathy with the acknowledgement of powerlessness: the limited potency of the individual is the basis of his proposed *yogic* psychology of action. Failure can beset even the most well thought out human endeavours, and thus there is a disjunction between actions and their 'fruits'. 2:47ab, 'your entitlement is only to the action, not at any time to the fruits', can be read as a straightforward empirical observation. In this context it is important to remember that, for Arjuna, the outcome of the war is in some considerable doubt: in terms of the *daiva / puruṣakāra* debate, his refusal to fight may be seen, notwithstanding the excuses he gives for his behaviour, as following from a belief that his best may not be good enough. Arjuna's uncertainty over the outcome of the war is stressed by Deshpande (1991). Although this uncertainty is not stated at 2:6 as Deshpande claims, it is an important factor in assessing Arjuna's behaviour, and provides in some ways a better introduction to the *Bhagavadgītā* than do Arjuna's scruples over *kuladharmā*: these are sidestepped by Kṛṣṇa, who does not explain how *kulakṣaya* will be avoided. From this perspective, Kṛṣṇa's self-revelation as the Almighty, and his subsequent assurance that 'you will conquer the adversaries in battle' (11:34d), would be the two pivotal factors in Arjuna's decision to fight (Otto 1939).

Let us look more closely at the *Mahābhārata*'s various presentations of the fatalist view, with its denial of individual freedom. To give an impression of the range of different presentations of this view, several examples follow, prefixed by their named presenters.

Samjaya: 'Who, by specific wisdom, can escape *daiva*? Nobody passes beyond the path appointed by *vidhātṛ*. All this is rooted in *kāla*, existence and non-existence, happiness and unhappiness' (1.1:186c-187).

Draupadī: '*Dhātṛ*, the ruler, sets everything for creatures, happiness and sorrow, the pleasant and the unpleasant, before issuing the semen. Just as a wooden doll is manipulated, body and limbs set in motion, so are these creatures. Permeating all creatures like space, the Lord here ordains what is good and bad. This one is restrained, powerless, a bird bound on a cord, standing in the wish of the Lord, master neither of others nor of him / herself. Like a gem strung on a thread, like a bull on a nose-rope, he / she follows *dhātṛ*'s command, consisting in him, entrusted to him. This person is ignorant, without power over their own happiness and sorrow: impelled by the Lord they may go to heaven or hell' (3.31:21-27).

Garuḍa: 'O sage, you, who want to abandon [*i.e.* kill] yourself, are not overwise. *Kāla* [*i.e.* time of death] is not adventitious: *kāla* is the highest Lord' (5.110:20).

Dhṛtarāṣṭra: 'I consider destiny (*diṣṭa*) alone to be primary, and heroism (*pauruṣa*) to be of no use. Though I know the ills of war, whose result is destruction, I am not able to fail [my] son, versed in

dishonesty, player of bad games, or to do what's good for me. My *buddhi* is a seer of the evil, but, encountering Duryodhana, it changes again' (5.156:4-6).

Prahlāda: 'All states of being and non-being arise from *svabhāva* and vanish likewise. Personal effort (*puruṣārtha*) is not found [in such processes]. In the absence of personal effort, there is no agent at all here, but perhaps there could be one's idea of acting oneself. Whoever considers themselves to be the doer of good and bad, their wisdom is faulty, and I consider them to be ignorant about their own embodiment' (12.215:15-17).

Vali: 'Anybody who has killed and conquered plays the man. But they are a non-agent: the only agent does it... One burns the already-burnt and one kills the already-killed. One perishes but has already perished: a person takes what is to-be-taken... I am not a doer, nor are you, nor is anyone else a doer. Folk are made use of successively and accidentally' (12.217:15, 20, 45).

Namuci: 'There is one governor (*śāstr*), no second governor. The governor governs the person lying in the womb. Ordered by it like water down a slope, I continue as I am directed... No assailant is found of those who are successively being killed. This [idea] is sorrow: the enemy thinks 'I am the doer'' (12.219:8, 13).

The idea of *kāla* here seems to centre on the time of one's death: it is perhaps through consideration of the lack of human control of death that fatalism receives its philosophical impetus. Even suicide does not constitute control of death. *Kāla* in its eschatological aspect is associated with *mṛtyu* and *yama*: it ripens creatures and then devours them. Through the terms *dhātṛ* and *svabhāva*, this human helplessness is extended into all aspects of life. *Kāla* and *dhātṛ* feature similarly in the Vedic Saṃhitās, *kāla* particularly in the *Atharvaveda* (Vassilkov 1999:18), *dhātṛ* particularly in book ten of the *Rgveda* (Modhey 1983, Keith 1989:203-206). Where these powers assume a cosmogonic function, the world so created is understood as diachronically specified: that is, it is not just any world that is created, but this exact world including all specific future events. Petitioning *kāla* or *dhātṛ*, from within time already begun, that one might not die until one hundred years of age, is apparently perfectly feasible: even though the exact moment of one's death is already contained within the unfolding world, methods of reading it (fortune-telling) are interpretive and disputed.

It is only in relation to these ideas that we can understand Kṛṣṇa's appearing in the guise of *kāla* at *Bhagavadgītā* 11:32-34 to inform Arjuna that the warriors he is reluctant to kill have, in effect, already been killed. Vassilkov (1999:23) notes that 'outside the *Gītā* the motif of the 'previously killed' occurs only in connection with *kāla*'. He goes on to sketch an ancient *kālavāda*, a philosophy of heroic fatalism peculiar to the Epics and didactically expounded at various critical junctures in the narrative. 'If *kālavāda* texts are examined against the background of the whole body of the Epic and not in isolation, one can see that the teaching on the omnipotence and vicissitudes of Time is inherent in the Epic world outlook' (p. 25). This *kālavāda* is often associated with doctrines later to be found in the *Sāṃkhya darśana*. The theory of the divisions of time is even called *kālasāṃkhya* (Vassilkov p. 18, *Mahābhārata*



12.299:1). The analysis of human mentality into its component parts (*indriyas*, *ahaṃkāra*, *manas* and *buddhi*) can be seen as a continuation of the naturalistic philosophy of *kālavāda*, seeking to explain, since people are convinced of their agency, how such an illusion arises, and how people (such as Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the quotation above) are induced to act out various roles through the operations of various desires and attachments.

It is interesting that Vassilkov connects the *kālavāda* notion of the ‘previously killed’ with the *Bhagavadgītā*’s exposition of *dehin* as unkillable and unkillable (2:19). The killing agency which people assume they have is actually a property of *kāla*, Kṛṣṇa or *prakṛti*. The notion that those who die have been previously killed by *kāla* is therefore part and parcel of the notion that the witnessing aspect of persons, which mistakenly witnesses them as killers and killed, does not do anything. Although the *Bhagavadgītā* introduces *dehin* long before it begins to speak in terms of fatalism, the fatalism which it subsequently invokes is the complement and completion of its *dehin* philosophy.<sup>20</sup> We have already shown, in chapter three, that the idea of *dehin* has been corrupted into the idea of a soul striving for *mokṣa*. This latter idea necessitates a mysterious blurring of the boundary between matter and non-matter. The radical idea of *dehin* is only preserved by making the world sufficient unto itself, causally complete, internally rational, and inscrutable to humans (the witness of *dehin* is biased by its specific instantiation and the power of *ahaṃkāra*). The completeness of the world extends even to the fluctuations in psychological timbre of its individual inhabitants: as Saṃjaya and Draupadī observe (see quotations above), people do not control their own happiness and misery. The location of *sukha* and *duḥkha* is the *manas-buddhi* complex, the *antaḥkaraṇa*: this is accounted for by *kāla* just as the death of the body is. *Dehin* can never kill: likewise, it can never feel happy.

There are several modern examples of the deconstruction of agency, which will now be sketched as illustrations of Kṛṣṇa’s ‘only *prakṛti* acts’. The psychoanalytic tradition has long held that traumatic experiences in childhood can have a determining effect upon behaviour later in life. To a certain extent, understanding the external causes of one’s personal psychology can help to reduce the distress caused by that psychology:

<sup>20</sup> The interdependence of external explanations for action and the invisibility of the ‘I’ is brought out by C. White 1995:92-93. ‘My hypothesis: the *zeitgeist* of any given historical moment will inhabit my body, whether I like it or not, whether that *zeitgeist* is consistent with my own sense of myself or not, as if my body were the alphabet and grammar through which alone time can make itself understood. My body is the clapper of history’s bell. This was *dharma*, the law on which rests the order of the world, with a vengeance, for it left me nothing to call my own.’

ironically, 'coming to terms with oneself' can be achieved by reducing the scope of that supposed 'self', by dissolving it into its background and history. The benefits of this strategy are not merely personal: from a social viewpoint, if specific types of behaviour can be correlated with specific types of prior experience, then attempts can be made to engineer certain behaviours. An approach in this direction has been made by the attempts of various governments to reduce anti-social behaviour by reducing poverty, deprivation and abuse. The opposite strategy here, based on the idea of individual personal agency, would be to hold miscreants individually responsible and punish accordingly. Crucially, however, agency is deconstructed even in this strategy: if the punishment is intended to reform the miscreant then his or her subsequent agency is partially appropriated by the punishing institution, and if it is intended merely as a deterrent to other potential miscreants then the agency of those others is partially appropriated by the advertisers of the miscreant's punishment. Individual agency here is transparently *not* the philosophy of the system: it is a pseudo-philosophy, an ideological and rhetorical accessory within the system. This results in doublethink (Orwell 1949): even successful advertising and marketing strategists, whose success might lead them to think of the buying public not as agents but as marionettes, will doubtless themselves take credit and responsibility for the success of their campaigns.

Evolutionary psychologists tend to imagine genes as an 'interest-group' in terms of which imagined actions receive their actual (rather than public) assessments, and effected actions their ultimate justifications (Dawkins 1976). The deconstruction of human activity along these lines is of great interest to the present study, because like the *Bhagavadgītā* it presents action in terms far removed from the ordinary discourse of individual agency. The left-wing criminologist supplies an explanation of action in terms of external (post-birth) environment, and the genetic determinist supplements it with an explanation in terms of internal environment. That these explanations are different and partial leads to problems in envisaging their combination: the nature / nurture debate is so inconclusive that there is still apparently room for the idea of non-environmental individual agency, particularly as this idea is an ideological scaffold for both capitalism and democracy. *Prakṛti* and *svabhāva* encompass both internal and external environments, and hence the threat they pose to the idea of individual agency is enormous.

Whatever it is that dictates behaviour, this behaviour is usually accompanied by a mental presentation of itself in different, and severely mediated, terms. This mental

presentation may be said to constitute the conventional motivation, or perceived cause, for action. The perceived cause is generally incorrect: since neither *prakṛti* nor gene-complexes are objects of experience, people cannot naturally think of their actions in terms of them.<sup>21</sup> However, the *Bhagavadgītā* makes it clear that the kind of cause perceived for one's actions is of critical importance in the context of one's *sukha*. This is not to say that one may choose how to be motivated. It is merely to suggest that persons habitually presenting their actions to themselves in certain terms have a very different mental atmosphere from those doing so in other terms.

### 5.3. The dissolution of freedom of choice and the problematics of exhortation and possibility

The criteria for working out what to do are countless and diverse, each action in each situation being based on or prefaced by a unique and specific set of mental activities, all of which are natural and run under their own steam, as it were. If it is thought that 'I decided to do *x*', this is a convention based on the knowledge that the mental activity behind *x* took place in *this* brain. But this brain is a natural product: there is no 'I' which created it as it is or which directs its operations.

To 'decide', then, is really to calculate what is the best thing to do. Yet this is not to say much, for the preferability of a line of action is often disputed by onlookers, or even in retrospect by the person effecting it, such as when one thinks that one has done 'the wrong thing'. The calculation can be imagined in this form: 'because of *a*, *b* and *c*, and notwithstanding *p* and *q*... *x* should be done'. It is irredeemably subjective both in the set of reasons adduced and in the logic of the final conclusion. It is hard to envisage exactly what happens to close the calculations and initiate the activity deemed appropriate, but it is clear that there are certain recurring modes of preferability, or interests, which are axiomatic in the calculation process, and in terms of which it is expressed, for example self-interest, the interest of a loved one, or of one's descendants or peers, and so on. Self-interest here in one form or another is the most common factor affecting what action is thought to be best:<sup>22</sup> this is to be expected, since an acting body

<sup>21</sup> Honderich 1993:70-71: 'we do feel a resistance to the thought that someone in a certain sense could predict every bit of our futures... Is that because we are rightly totally convinced of the actual impossibility of someone's getting the necessary knowledge, and confusedly transfer our overwhelming sense of this impossibility to the whole proposition that if they had it, they could tell our futures?'

<sup>22</sup> There is no conflict between this and the genetic determinist viewpoint mentioned earlier: here we are talking about apparent reasons for acting, there we were talking about actual but hidden ones.

is in a unique position (through sensory connection to a *manas-buddhi* complex) of being able to ensure its own welfare, and can be expected to do so. Yet in an important sense such mental calculation is merely an accessory to the action rather than its cause. In many cases such calculation may be performed in retrospect to explain an action to oneself or to another: even when the calculation in favour of *x* precedes the action *x*, it is never known for sure that the calculation is the reason for the action. So many actions are performed instinctively, unconsciously or unselfconsciously, and are only given motives when the actor turns their conscious attention to the action in a certain way. Thus, practice precedes philosophy. If asked 'why did you put up the umbrella?', the answer 'because it started raining' expresses the situation rather better than 'because I wanted to stay dry': the rain is an obvious object, whereas 'I want' is obscure, often inferred rather than experienced even by the actor him / herself. In practice, this 'I want' is more likely to be experienced on occasions when it starts raining but the umbrella has been left at home.

The thrust of the analysis of action in terms of prior programmatic experience, genetic inheritance, *prakṛti*, *svabhāva*, *kāla* or *dhātr* is to present the causes of action in terms radically different to those of intention. Intention, like pain, rests at the epistemological level alone:<sup>23</sup> it can be dissolved into *prakṛti* or any of the other terms mentioned. Then, it does not matter whether or not intention be thought of as a second-order cause of action. One could say that selfconscious actions (those done on purpose, so to speak) are caused by intentions, and intentions in turn caused by *prakṛti*, which also causes those of our actions that are involuntary (unwishing, *avaśa*). Or, equally, one could deny intentions any causative status, and suppose that all actions, voluntary and involuntary, are caused by *prakṛti*, which also causes, in conjunction with every 'voluntary' action, a corresponding intention. Nothing philosophical is lost by adopting this latter formulation. There is in any case a problem with the idea of a second-order cause: such a cause is simply not causal in the way that *prakṛti* is, and any number of equally valid second-order 'causes' could be hypothesised depending on what range of events was being investigated from what perspective. When invoked as a cause, *prakṛti*, *svabhāva* or *kāla* denotes that, since each cause is itself caused, no finite list of specific causes is sufficient to explain any single event. However, unless we grant intentions their pseudo-causative status, we will find it impossible to speak in terms of them. It is because their appearing causative is a trick of *ahaṁkāra* that Kṛṣṇa says *asakta karman*

<sup>23</sup> There is no distinction between feeling pain and being in pain.

is without *samkalpa* (4:19, 6:24), but, as we saw in chapter four, it is impossible to imagine the psychology of a non-intentional actor.

In her analysis of intention, Anscombe (1957:6-7) remarks that

‘I once saw some notes by Wittgenstein in which he imagined some leaves blown about by the wind and saying ‘Now I’ll go this way... now I’ll go that way’ as the wind blew them. The analogy [with human intention] is unsatisfactory in apparently assigning no role to these predictions other than that of an unnecessary accompaniment to the movements of the leaves. But it might be replied: what do you mean by an ‘unnecessary’ accompaniment? If you mean one in the absence of which the movements of the leaves would have been just the same, the analogy is certainly bad. But how do you know what the movements of the leaves would have been if they had not been accompanied by those thoughts?’

This last question is very much to the point, and the problem with this hypothetical knowledge is not that it is of an inaccessible truth, but that there is no truth for it to be of: the world turns out only as it does, and all other things are never equal enough for us to test the relative integrity of the parameters we might pick out. But insofar as people discourse in language, and refer to certain body-events as actions in terms of brain-events they call intentions, the linguistic role of intentions is to claim an event as caused, at least in part, by those intentions. As soon as the perspective is such that one wants to reach behind this practical convention, and discover a broader type of cause cast in less anthropocentric terms, the necessity of the connection between intentions and actions can be disputed. We need only stress involuntary and unknown human actions, or the skilful actions of somnambulists, on the one hand, and suppose that leaves know they cannot fully control their movements while awake, and often wake up where they know they did not fall asleep, on the other, to make Wittgenstein’s analogy look very good indeed. Of course, people do not know what it is like to be a leaf, so the analogy is hypothetical, but, equally, intention is a self-selected human phenomenon, discussed always from a human viewpoint. In contrast, *kāla*, for example, has causative effects on all kinds of entities, human and non-human. Having discovered this contrast, and having seen that the connection between actions and intentions only exists from the human viewpoint, we cannot thereby abandon that viewpoint, even though we might use it differently.

It seems that common-sense notions are rendered philosophically difficult by the text’s determinism, and that, if the meaning of this determinism is to be understood, many natural ways of thinking about human interactions with the world must be re-cast.

For example, once this determinism is in place, it makes no sense to say that Kṛṣṇa is urging Arjuna to choose to fight. On the contrary, Kṛṣṇa states that Arjuna *will*

fight (18:59-60).<sup>24</sup> The exhortative aspect of the *Bhagavadgītā*, which many commentators have stressed as part of its narrative and dramatic situation, must, from this viewpoint, evaporate. Indeed, if actions are fated, the sense of exhortation and imperative utterance is dissolved. The same is true of past conditionals, as seen above.<sup>25</sup> Yet, paradoxically, Kṛṣṇa continues to use such utterance even though he knows that Arjuna will fight anyway. What is going on? Kṛṣṇa seems to be aware that, though he might tell Arjuna that his decision is meaningless, this is far from how the matter seems to Arjuna: that is to say, Kṛṣṇa is meeting Arjuna on Arjuna's terms. Kṛṣṇa has to be careful how he explains the situation, because Arjuna, having a mistaken view which riddles his entire psyche and will not be dispelled easily, can only understand the situation in terms of this mistaken view.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this mistaken view underlies all conventional means of discussing human action, and any new analysis must be expressed, at least initially, in the existing traditions of language, however inadequate they may be.

But why explain the situation to Arjuna at all, when he is going to fight whatever happens? Why does Kṛṣṇa bother with this long and intricate speech which is, in terms of its ostensible purpose, unnecessary? In answer, it might be said that Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna's friend, and wants to help him in his hour of need, to take him on a short-cut, so to speak, so that his realisation that he must fight comes as quickly (!) and painlessly as possible: such reasoning, however, is misguided. For Kṛṣṇa (the man) is part of the same causally determined nexus as Arjuna, and is equally in no position to choose to say or do this for this reason, or that for that reason, or nothing at all for some other reason. To say that Arjuna will be compelled to fight and cannot follow up his decision not to, is not to say that this would have been the case had Kṛṣṇa not spoken exactly as he did. It is perfectly possible for Kṛṣṇa's words to be a necessary cause of Arjuna's fighting without Kṛṣṇa having chosen to speak and without Arjuna, having heard Kṛṣṇa's speech, choosing to

<sup>24</sup> Ayer 1963:251 says that 'the fact that I shall do what I shall do...entails that I cannot fail to do it...but not that I could not fail to do it'. He goes on to conclude that the action in question, because 'it is conceivable that I should act otherwise', is not logically necessary even though it may be causally determined. This line of reasoning is suspect because it establishes logical necessity on the grounds of what is conceivable. We are in the business of conceiving the future as open: this fact, known from observation, may indeed throw up such a concept of logical necessity, but Kṛṣṇa, by insisting that this conception of the future is mistaken, renders all its corollaries philosophically empty.

<sup>25</sup> Hence Wittgenstein's (1953) puzzlement over the sense and meaning of expectation and the optative mood in language.

<sup>26</sup> This technique is also known in the Buddhist tradition, as *upāya kauśalya* ('skill-in-means'), where, amongst other things, it bridges the epistemic gulf between ultimate truth (*paramārtha satya*) and conventional truth (*saṃvṛtti satya*).

calculations of what to do are always personal and idiosyncratic because the imagination, experience and memory of persons vary. Moreover, they are ephemeral: a person may say 'I'll do *x* because of *y* and *z*' before the event, and 'I did *x* because of *p* and *q*' after the event, and be wrong on both occasions.

In the same way that freedom of choice is inferred from the imaginary plurality of possible futures, so it can be inferred from the unquestionable plurality of available objects, as in a shop which promotes customers' freedom of choice by providing a wide range of goods. Of course this may be a successful marketing strategy: it will mean that more of the people who buy the same things every week can buy them from that shop, and can think, on the way home, about what they 'could have' bought instead. But the sense of 'could have done otherwise' is obscure: if what one chooses is capricious, then that caprice occurring there and then must have a cause, however unknowable, and all other things are not then equal.

From the fatalistic perspective of the *Bhagavadgītā*, then, there is no reason why a person making a deliberate effort to achieve a certain goal is an event of a different order than lightning striking him or her dead and thus frustrating that effort. The distinction between *daiva* and *puruṣakāra* is an anthropocentric illusion, for it only differentiates event-causes which are external to the person's mental 'causation' from those which are internal.<sup>28</sup> But these internal 'causes' are as external to *dehin* as are those which *dehin* does not witness. As Maṅki says at *Mahābhārata* 12.171:12cd-13, 'Destiny (*daiva*) is exact, so there is no heroism (*pauruṣa*). Or if at any time one should arrive at [the idea of] so-called heroism, then, by keeping up the search, only destiny is found'.<sup>29</sup> Determinism is quite simply a broader concept than freedom: I can be destined to do *x* thinking, falsely, that I could have done otherwise, but I cannot choose to be totally determined.

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cannot be any part of the plan if plan there be.'

<sup>28</sup> Nietzsche calls this error 'Turkish fatalism' (translation from Stambaugh 1972:11): 'Turkish fatalism contains the fundamental error of placing man and fate opposite each other like two separate things: man, it says, can strive against fate, can try to defeat it, but in the end it always remains the winner, for which reason the smartest thing to do is to give up or live just any way at all. The truth is that every man himself is a piece of fate; when he thinks he is striving against fate in the way described, fate is being realised here, too; the struggle is imaginary, but so is resignation to fate; all these imaginary ideas are included in fate. The fear which most people have of the doctrine of determinism of the will is precisely the fear of this Turkish fatalism... this fear of the belief in fate is also fate... In you the whole future of the human world is predetermined; it will not help you if you are terrified of yourself. Nietzsche sees every actual event, object, thought and feeling as totally natural. This analysis is very different from that of Johnson 1998:xx: 'some actions accord with fate whilst others do not'.

<sup>29</sup> Basham 1951:38-39 identifies Maṅki with Makkhali Gosāla, the *Ājīvika* leader.

fight. Something else, presumably, was a necessary cause of Kṛṣṇa's speaking. To say that Arjuna will fight anyway is not to say that he could or would have done so without hearing Kṛṣṇa's speech. But from this perspective, as mentioned above, the sense of 'could' and 'would' is lost: the history of the world is singular, there is one way that things are, and it includes Kṛṣṇa's speech just as much as Arjuna's fighting. Arjuna is not told this explicitly, but then, as McCarthy says (1990:85), 'it is not necessary... that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding'.<sup>27</sup>

Let us look a bit more closely at individual freedom. At this stage in the discussion it will be clear that the idea denoted by this word is an ideological fiction. Insofar as people have sought to define 'freedom', there are two main lines that can be taken: either, like 'intention', the term is experiential, and refers to the intuition that one is not totally constrained to do what one does, or, more seriously, it denotes a real ability to have chosen to do otherwise, all other things being equal. As mentioned above, however, there can be no evidence for such an ability: this latter definition of freedom is an unjustifiable reification of the intuition. The illusion that differing actions are possible can be explained in terms of the person's predicament prior to acting. This predicament and the coming action will be experienced by comparison with one's own previous predicaments, actions and sequels, and those recounted by others. Knowledge of what will be done, and what will happen in consequence, is not yet to be had, and so the person imagines and judges differing outcomes of differing actions before settling on a course of action. Calculations of this kind are done all the time, generally without much selfconsciousness, methodology or clear idea of the bases upon which one is sorting for superiority. This is perhaps why honest people can, under careful interrogation, be made to look as if they are lying to cover something up. These

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<sup>27</sup> A lengthy quotation is in order, because of the economy and beauty with which it ties together so many of the strands here under discussion (p. 328-329).

'He began to point out various men in the room and to ask if these men were here for a good time or if indeed they knew why they were here at all.

Everybody don't have to have a reason to be someplace.

That's so... they do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference... If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other?... This is an orchestration for an event. For a dance in fact. The participants will be apprised of their roles at the proper time. For now it is enough that they have arrived. As the dance is the thing with which we are concerned and contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well. In any event the history of all is not the history of each nor indeed the sum of those histories and none here can finally comprehend the reason for his preference for he has no way of knowing even in what the event consists. In fact, were he to know he might well absent himself and you can see that that



More (1995:204) claims that 'in order to be philosophically satisfactory, any theory of human action should be in a position to account for and cope with the phenomena of freedom, responsibility, praise, blame, reward and punishment'. Now, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s theory of human action certainly copes with these things, treating them as mistaken but understandable interpretations, rather than as phenomena. The *a priori* assumption that real freedom exists renders More's approach unphilosophical.<sup>30</sup> When he goes on to say that 'a theory of genesis of action should avoid two extremes, *viz.* absolute necessity and absolute contingency', he is not talking about the causes of action, but about a conventional human understanding of action. There is no problem with absolute necessity in genesis of action providing that the widespread contrary belief can be accounted for.

Conventional concepts are here under severe strain. Necessity and chance / contingency are only explicable in terms of whether or not something else could have happened instead. This question, as we have seen, is a nonsense. Possibility and probability are not features of the physical world, but of human understanding of it. As outlined above, 2.6, this conclusion goes against the accepted Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, in which randomness and probability are used to explain quantum events in the absence of any other explanatory scheme. Randomness is precisely *not* an explanatory scheme: generally speaking, it is invoked to cover up ignorance of the actual factors involved, so the toss of a coin is called 'random' through ignorance of the precise forces governing its trajectory in each specific instance. Probability and statistical reasoning are the only ways we have of working around this ignorance. Quantum mechanics has thus come up against the limits of possible human understanding of causation. Kṛṣṇa's determinism leads to the same place: when people act, they think they know, but in fact they cannot *really* know, why they do so. This does *not* mean that there is no reason: there is no need to suggest that our idea of causation may be at fault. The universe is clockwork, but we are never going to discover all the mechanisms which operate.

The distinction between the ontological and the epistemological aspects of human activity is vital: the activity of people plays a role in the world, but most aspects of this role are unknown to them. The physical, event-centred element of persons must not be confused with their experiential element: after all, people kill many organisms each time

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<sup>30</sup> This is also true of Bhattacharji 1995, and is a general problem with approaches to Epic philosophy. Although an ideological intrusion, human freedom is also part of the ideology of the text's later editors, and so the mistake is at least partially understandable.

they take a step, but generally they do not experience themselves as doing so, and, conversely, they may hallucinate doing many deeds which in fact they will never do.

#### 5.4. Determinism as a textual secret: fatalism and the text's editors

When Draupadī expounds her fatalistic *dhātr* theory (quoted above),<sup>31</sup> Yudhiṣṭhira fears that it will promote *adharmā* and inactivity. This appears to be the message put forward by the editors of the story: the whole of the narrative, the destruction wrought by the war in all its grisly details (poignantly relayed to Dhṛtarāṣṭra by Saṃjaya), revolves around Yudhiṣṭhira's behaviour during the dicing match and Dhṛtarāṣṭra's failure to stop the escalating conflict, both of which are directly traced, by the Epic's presentation, to paralysis caused by the philosophy of *daiva*. From the determinist perspective, it may well be that hearing a certain theory will cause one to act or not act in certain ways. Hearing Kṛṣṇa's speech causes Arjuna to fight: though there are many other causes (he is a *kṣatriya*, etc.), the only difference, as far as we are told, between Arjuna before the speech and Arjuna after the speech is that he has heard the speech. Yet it is also clear that the causes of activity or inactivity are not fully known to people: an inactive person may or may not have been caused to be inactive by allegiance to a fatalistic theory. Basham (1951:xii) says that 'man is not a logical creature... he does not abstain from effort although he may believe the issue to be predetermined, as the example of Calvin and his church shows'. There is no necessary connection between determinism and inactivity: the determinism in question is, after all, only discovered as an explanation of activity.<sup>32</sup> There may be some truth in Yudhiṣṭhira's fear: if people naturally misunderstand themselves to be agents, they may well also naturally misunderstand this determinist theory such that it causes them to become inactive (in the case of Arjuna, of course, the very opposite happened). Can a theory be censored because it can be misunderstood? Of course: but such a process indicates a social rather than a philosophical agenda. This is what lies behind 3:29cd: 'he who knows all should not agitate the stupid who do not know all'. A little knowledge may be a bad thing: having introduced the *dehin / prakṛti* perspective, Kṛṣṇa has thoroughly confused Arjuna, and

<sup>31</sup> As Draupadī is introducing the theory, she calls it *itihāsa purātana*, an old tale.

<sup>32</sup> Bedekar 1992:194 uncritically parrots the viewpoint of determinism's ancient critics: 'the protagonists and the followers of these deterministic doctrines denying the free will of man and his moral responsibility for any good or evil must have, in practice, tended to degenerate into parasites of society, leading a vagrant, idle and immoral life'. However, it may well be that deterministic philosophy predated the population expansion and cultural mixing which led to the discourses of choice, freedom, morality and responsibility invoked here.

completes the lesson only by allowing him an experiential commentary, the revelation of the universal form of *kāla*-Kṛṣṇa (11:5-49).

But the fact of 'knowing all' (that is, the distinction between *dehin* and *prakṛti*, and the unavoidability of one's precise activities) has prompted Arjuna into vital activity. Kṛṣṇa's theory, correctly understood, is not a secret and dangerous doctrine. To be sure, it is unconventional, even counterintuitive, but it is potent, resulting in *sukha* and freedom from *karmabandha*. Kṛṣṇa says of his dialogue with Arjuna that 'whoever, faithful and trusting, hears [this *dharmic* dialogue], is freed and obtains the splendid worlds of the righteous' (18:71): this happens through being righteous, that is, by acting right. The *jñāna*, as it were, *causes* correct action.

Nonetheless, acknowledging that its full acceptance is only possible after sustained *yoga*, Kṛṣṇa does not rigorously apply the determinist perspective throughout the text: he generally speaks as if assuming free will in action. Though repeatedly describing the viewpoint of the perfected person, the text tacitly acknowledges that its audience is not perfected, for example by using the optative, conditional and imperative moods.

Yudhiṣṭhira's objections to the *dhāṭṛ* philosophy in *Mahābhārata* 3.32 are not philosophical objections but practical ones,<sup>33</sup> based on assumptions about how ordinary folk make sense of their actions, and the need to present a theory which ensures social responsibility within the *ahaṃkāra* illusion. When Yudhiṣṭhira responds to Draupadī, the subject moves from the ontological to the epistemological level, and consequently the philosophical insights of the idea of *dhāṭṛ* are obscured.<sup>34</sup> Draupadī modifies her view to say that 'whatever a person may do, good or bad, is appointed by *dhāṭṛ*, the development of previous actions into fruits' (3.33:20). Responsibility has been rescued by means of *karmabandha*: the responsible entity, however, is obscure. Moral responsibility does not follow unless the 'acts done before' were freely done, but *dhāṭṛ* leaves no room for free acts: the problem cannot be solved by shifting the free acts backwards into the distant past. In terms of the history of ideas, it seems clear that what

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<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, Yudhiṣṭhira is one of the *Mahābhārata*'s fatalists: he admits that accepting the challenge to play dice may not be prudent, but accepts nonetheless, claiming to be under the sway of *dhāṭṛ* (2.52:14, 18).

<sup>34</sup> This tendency to 'jump levels' is demonstrated by the fear and anger generally directed towards the strong determinist position (see Greene 1984:2: 'I have found that the word fate is often quite offensive to many people in this enlightened twentieth century'), and by the lengths that some philosophers will go to to rescue the idea of free will. It is disturbing to ask people to suspend their normal social, relational and introspective conventions and think carefully about how the physical basis of things is

is to be found in these chapters, as in the *Bhagavadgītā*, is a natural philosophy explaining actions and events without recourse to conventional, moral or legalistic ideas of agency and responsibility, which has been adjusted in order to promote *dharma* and accommodate belief in rebirth.

The *Bhagavadgītā*, especially in its final chapter, makes it clear that the tasks one is called to do are matched to one's *svabhāva* (thereby providing a justification of sorts for the caste system), but again here the determinism is not followed through, for the possibility is mentioned of failing to discharge one's appropriate *varṇa* duties. Such a possibility should not exist: that it does so here is evidence that *svabhāva* and its correlate *svadharma* were co-opted from their strictly philosophical context, where they are specific to an individual, and used as part of a code of social morality in which they were specific to identifiable groups. The tendency of the *Mahābhārata*'s editors and the subsequent Hindu tradition was to put this group *svabhāva* (i.e. what caste one is born into) down to the operation of *karmabandha* from a different life. This move is not in order: it neither answers the question 'why is this the case with me?', since the 'me' indicated is an illusion of *ahaṃkāra* and cannot be equated with the 'me' of any previous person, nor does it answer the question 'why is this person witnessed by this *dehin*?', since the differentiation of *dehins* is not in order, differentiation being possible only in terms of *prakṛti*.

The idea that one's ordained *svabhāva* is due to *karmabandha* is not mentioned by the *Mahābhārata* as often as one might expect, and appears to be a new idea. It complicates the sense of the idea of fatalism: fatalism provides a simple explanation of action without individual freedom or ultimate responsibility, but if fate is due to action in past lives, then agency and responsibility are given back, not to the person but to the *cittasaṃtāna*, the *karmically* coherent chain of lives. The meaning of fatalism is thus obscured. The different explanations for action are at cross purposes: Saṃjaya alternately berates Dhṛtarāṣṭra's passivity, blaming him for the war (2.72:5, 3.48:11), and reassures him of his impotence, blaming fate and other external causes (5.156:13-15, 6.16:6). As Hill observes (1993:13), 'in their assessment of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's role, the Epic bards never satisfactorily resolve the problem of whether causal agency and responsibility lay with the individual actor, external forces, or alternatively some particular combination'. At *Mahābhārata* 11.1:17-18 Dhṛtarāṣṭra traces his part in the war to actions performed in his previous births, crediting *dhātṛ* with this precise

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constructed. Perhaps psychobabble will be the death of natural philosophy.

arrangement of their consequences. This formulation matches with Draupadī's second presentation of the *dhātṛ* theory, but generally the *Mahābhārata* does not invoke past lives to explain the lot of its characters, and poetic justice is done within one lifetime. At *Mahābhārata* 12.217:35-36 Vali, discoursing with his conqueror Indra, opposes the introduction of past lives as an explanation of current circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

'[Our] situation is not due to us or what we have done: [your] situation is not due to you or what you have done. The event is not yours, nor does it belong to the others, still less is it mine, O you of a hundred sacrifices:<sup>36</sup> be it prosperity or lack of prosperity, it's a result of succession (*paryāya*).'

Vali, one of the *Mahābhārata*'s most convincing *kālavādins*, is making a philosophical point here. The equanimity he has achieved is a direct result of fatalism and the concomitant meaninglessness of self-praise and self-blame, and the introduction of *karmabandha* would tend to reintroduce the possibility of these psychological hindrances. Vali's attitude is echoed in the next chapter by Śrī (prosperity, sovereignty), who passes from him to Indra (Hiltebeitel 1976:156-166). When asked whether or not her movement is due to Vali's or Indra's actions, her first response is to say 'neither *dhātṛ* nor *vidhātṛ* controls me at all: *kāla* controls the successions. Do not be contemptuous of [Vali]' (12.218:10). Subsequently she says that she moves as she wishes, and mentions lapses in Vali's virtuous behaviour and homage to *brāhmaṇas* as reasons for her departure. This idea is the opposite of Vali's, and looks very much as if it was inserted to encourage orthopraxy.<sup>37</sup>

These arguments suggest that *karmabandha* is a later idea than *kālavāda*, at least in the *Mahābhārata*. Vassilkov (1999) suggests that various points in the narrative had long been opportunities for bards to expound *kālavādin* martial philosophy, and that (p. 28) 'the *brāhmaṇa* 'editors' of the *Mahābhārata* would place, next to a piece of heroic-didactic preaching of an earlier time, a new layer, now in the spirit of a new, Hinduist worldview'.<sup>38</sup> He goes on to say (p. 29):

'In the situation when the Epic, having developed in its depths a peculiar philosophy of heroic fatalism, began to be subjected to the influence of the early Hinduist worldview with its concept of

<sup>35</sup> For other examples of opposition to the doctrine of *karman* in the *Mahābhārata*, see Bharadvāja's view at 12.179-180. By denying that a *cittasaṃtāna* can span more than one life, he denies the basis of *karmabandha*.

<sup>36</sup> The vocative is ironic: affluence would be a commonly imagined *karmic* result of correct ritual activity, but Vali is denying that there is any causative *karmic* link.

<sup>37</sup> Vassilkov gives two persuasive examples (*Mahābhārata* 13.1:62-74 and 17.1:3) of interpolations made in order to pass the causative role of *kāla* back onto the individual by means of *karmabandha*.

<sup>38</sup> Vassilkov suggests (p. 28) that chapters 215-220 are vestiges of an old 'core' of the *Śāntiparvan*. See also Hiltebeitel 1976:156 for suggestion of this view. See above, 2.3, for a discussion of the problems of talking in these terms, and how Hiltebeitel later changed his mind.

*ātman-brahman*, the idea of *karman* etc., the two worldviews were destined to enter a conflict. Sometimes in the fatalistic texts of the *Mahābhārata* one comes across passages directed against the Vedas, the highest authority for the *brāhmaṇic*-Hindu tradition. On the other hand, there appear in the *Mahābhārata* some texts which condemn *kālavāda* and fatalism as such. Moreover, the ideas of *kālavāda* begin to be attributed to *asuras*, and are more frequently interpreted as a kind of philosophy of the defeated (demons). Special editing is being carried out aimed at representing Kāla as an aspect of the Hindu Śiva or Viṣṇu or at the assertion of the dominance of the law of *karman* over the law of *paryāya*.<sup>39</sup>

This constitutes additional evidence, to go with that discussed in chapter three, showing that the ideas of *saṃsāra* and *mokṣa* were not introduced to the *Mahābhārata* at a particularly early stage of its development, and that they conflict with the ideas it already contained. As has been argued throughout this thesis, these later ideas are political and ideological rather than philosophical, and correspond to the text being diffused over a larger and more culturally diverse population and geographical area. The possibility of this diffusion, and its utility for promoting the interests of the text's editors, make Sanskritisation possible, and probably do not predate the manuscript tradition by very much.

The interests of the *brāhmaṇical* editors in question were well served by using the text to disseminate a prescriptive ethics, behavioural and intentional, individual and social. This was particularly possible against the background of *saṃsāra* and the biographised soul (based on a misunderstanding of the philosophical *dehin*) questing towards *mokṣa* (subsequently presented by Rāmānuja as a kind of individual experience: see above, 3.1). In pursuit of such a goal, the audience are urged to change their thoughts and actions, to uphold the rituals ordained in the Vedas, not to seek enlightenment by neglecting their social duties, and to encourage the God-given arrangement of society with its institutionalised inequalities of caste, race, gender and so on. But this '*dharma* for *mokṣa*' ideology has been supplanted onto a text whose soteriology, if we can call it that, has a different, short-term goal, peace of mind, attained through reflection on the mysteries of agency, the sheer naturalness of all actual events, and the distinction between *dehin* and *prakṛti*. When the implications of this older soteriology are thought through, people cannot control what they do. The text's trick of urging its audience to do this rather than that is transparently ludicrous, then, unless the fatalistic ideas within it are glossed over or modified. The explanation of *daiva* and *svabhāva*, apparently 'chance' events, as payback for actions performed earlier in one's life or in a previous life, that is, as *karmabandha*, is the only way that

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<sup>39</sup> Vassilkov translates *paryāya* as 'vicissitude': I have rendered it as 'succession'.

the text can bridge the gap between the two soteriologies and achieve its practical aim.<sup>40</sup> But if the idea of freedom of choice is interrogated, the strategy still cannot work. Arjuna cannot not fight: if this eventuality, which need not be generative of *karmabandha* if he fights *asakta*, is explained as the maturing of *karmabandhas* from his previous lives, then those *karmabandhas* come from *sakta karmans*, and those *karmans* were other events that the pre-Arjuna could not do, which eventuality is explained as the maturing of prior *karmabandhas*, and so on. If freedom cannot be exercised directly in Arjuna's choice at Kurukṣetra, then there is no other place for it to enter proceedings. It might be objected that it is only the physical action which is determined, and that within this determinism there is room for free manoeuvre between doing the action *sakta* and doing it *asakta*: however, this is not what the text means by freedom (it seems to suggest we should freely chose those activities appropriate to our *varṇa*), and furthermore the division seems artificial, for the *Bhagavadgītā* analyses mental activities in exactly the same terms (*guṇas etc.*) as physical ones. The analysis of Johnson (1997), who admits that Arjuna cannot not fight but gives him the freedom to either fight *sakta* or *asakta*, is therefore faulty. He says that (p. 94) 'real choice in the *Gītā*... is between acknowledging one's *lack* of real choice and remaining ignorant of that fact (insofar as ignorance of something can be deemed a choice)'. But *buddhi*, the location of this acknowledgement or ignorance (and thus of the difference between externally identical *sakta* and *asakta* actions), is a part of determined *prakṛti*. If Arjuna fights *asakta* this will, we imagine, be down to his having heard Kṛṣṇa's speech while receptive enough, for millions of precise reasons, to then fight *asakta*. Johnson's 'real choice' is still illusory, even though, for obvious reasons, the text does not explicitly make this point. Johnson does preface his claim with the rider 'in a strictly literal sense', but the thrust of Kṛṣṇa's analysis of *ahaṅkāra* is that 'strictly literal' choices are those ones which the forms of language tend to make us fantasise, and which are therefore

<sup>40</sup> The sage Mārkaṇḍeya, who visits the Pāṇḍavas in the forest during their exile and tells many stories (*Mahābhārata* 3.180-221: Mārkaṇḍeya is still present in chapter 224 and his departure is not mentioned), seems to be a particular vehicle for the explanation of *daiva* as *karmabandha*. 3.181:21ab, 25-27ab: 'The course of a deceased person is here, according to their own actions... One's self-performed action always follows like a shadow: then it ripens, and one is born meriting happiness or sorrow. The person fixed on the rule of death, taking nothing from auspicious or inauspicious marks, is marked by a mistaken view of knowledge, so that this is pronounced 'the way of the witless''. A few verses later (v. 32) this is placed in parallel with the fatalistic scheme: 'people obtain something from fate, something from necessity, something from their own actions', but the introduction of acts destroys the psychological economy of the *kāla* perspective, and there would be no way of knowing what is to be explained by which 'power', hence the verse says 'may there be no more of your reflection'. Thereafter, previous-life causes are hypothesised at will: see 3.199-200, 205-207. At 205:19 fate and *karmabandha* are presented as one and the same thing, and the *kālavāda* has been fully appropriated into the text's new social context, as at *Mahābhārata* 3.33:20 and 11.1:17-18.

always unreal.

The *Bhagavadgītā* analyses the person into the two poles of objectness (*prakṛti*) and subjectness (*dehin*). The philosophical anthropology of *prakṛti* and *dehin* does not provide any conventional motive for action: it merely states that action is natural, unavoidable, and compatible with peace of mind. Editors added the encouragement of certain social, ritual and religious activities into the text. This allowed action to be treated in terms of conventional motivation (see above, 3.4). The question of motives does not naturally arise within the *prakṛti / dehin* analysis because the normal *ahamkāra*-infected psychological correlates of an action are not conceived as its cause. The picture given is thus one in which people take part in action without necessarily having any selfconscious reason to do so. Acting is something they cannot avoid, and though it does not necessarily do them any good, apart from maintaining the conditions for their proper survival, the harm it may do can be avoided: contrary to the claims of the renouncers, action is no hindrance to progress towards *mokṣa*. This picture, though it may dissuade would-be renouncers, does not present the material world in a positive light. However, the use of the word 'positive' here betrays a movement from the field of philosophy to that of social psychology. It has been suggested earlier that information cannot be criticised as 'pessimistic' or as 'failing to encourage activity': but if the text is co-opted to facilitate some kind of social project, then philosophy is not enough and must be supplemented by appropriate psychological suggestions. For example, Urquhart (1914:490), objecting to what he sees as the *Bhagavadgītā*'s pantheism, states that 'we cannot acquiesce in a facile identification of God with the world, or a perhaps less facile merging of the world in God, if we are to have any secure foundation for morality, progress and religion'. Here the social project is explicit and is presented as if it is an axiom which should dictate what kinds of things religious texts claim to be true. Likewise the *Bhagavadgītā*, not quite so transparently, interprets the *prakṛti / dehin* philosophy in terms that positively legitimise actions consonant with morality, ritual observance, and the protection of society by broadly *brāhmaṇical* traditions and structures. Such actions can be legitimised by the text because *asakta karman* is particularly applicable to them. Since the recipient of the fruits of such actions is not the individual actor so much as society and the cosmos at large (see chapter four),<sup>41</sup> these actions are fully amenable to *karmaphalatyāga*.

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<sup>41</sup> The *brāhmaṇas* are also primary recipients of the fruits of ritual action insofar as that action includes *dāna* (18:5).



### 5.5. Wittgenstein, *māyā* and the symbolic order

This section is a further exploration of the acting, experiencing, conventional ‘I’, and of Kṛṣṇa’s strategy for removing attachment to its gratification, based as this attachment is upon mistaken philosophy. The mistaken philosophy of the individual, accountable, agentive subject-body is a by-product of the institutions and conventions of language (see above, 5.2), which evolve to map the independent mobility of speakers and which operate in rhetorical ways. We speak to do things to or with listeners: the indicative mood, with its assertions or observations of what is the case, is often rhetorical in effect.

The constraints placed upon philosophy by language have been expertly explored by Wittgenstein (1953), several quotations from which follow, with interpretations pertinent to the discussion.

‘We predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it... The proposition and the word that logic deals with are supposed to be something pure and clear-cut. And we rack our brains over the nature of the *real* sign’ (p. 46).

The postulation of a conventional acting and experiencing ‘self’, and the speculation over what the pronoun *ātman* refers to, can be seen as a by-product of language’s differentiation of persons. The way in which it is found useful to speak of persons gives us a contrived impression of what they are.

‘[Philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognise those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language’ (p. 47).

The ‘urge to misunderstand’ here is denoted in the *Bhagavadgītā* by *ahamkāra*, which makes a person reluctant to admit that ‘I’ is *nothing but* a figure of speech. ‘Arranging what we have always known’ is the application of the same categories of cause and effect to person-events (actions) as to non-person-events.

‘The problems arising through a misunderstanding of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language’ (p. 47).

These disquietudes are the absence of *sukha* accompanying thoughts such as ‘what have I done?’ or ‘what will become of me?’.

‘When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’ – and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? What *we* [philosophers] do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’ (p.48).

The words ‘myself’, ‘himself’ and so on are useful as pointers to indicate different subject-bodies. No metaphysical essence is denoted. And so,

'the results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery' (p. 48).

*Duḥkha* can be seen as such a bump.

In the case of *ahaṃkāra*, certain terms of human language, having emerged as useful on account of the separateness of persons and the contingencies of their mental structure, produce a belief in an agentive self as a responsible entity corresponding to the word *aham*. Wittgenstein sees philosophy as the uncovering of such beliefs as nonsense. To uncover the *ahaṃkāra* belief as nonsense is at the heart of Kṛṣṇa's message. Kṛṣṇa also provides a metaphysical analysis of *aham* in terms of *dehin* and *prakṛti*, words of little conventional use, which may replace it in certain contexts, and, the terms having been as it were made to measure, may be less likely to cause confusion.

The *Bhagavadgītā* views language as an alienating activity. By describing what he is about to do (that is, kill his relatives and *gurus*) to himself, Arjuna thinks in terms of the symbolic order, the conventions and constraints imposed through language by the community which uses it. Thinking of his actions in terms of *dharma*, he is alienated from an authentic engagement in them. He cannot just go ahead and *be* them. This is why, at the end of the text, Kṛṣṇa presents him with the shocking instruction to 'abandon all *dharmas*' (18:66a). In many ways, the *Bhagavadgītā* is a demonstration of the alienating effects of language. It presents *ahaṃkāra* as a linguistically induced fiction. It explains that thinking in terms of the *dvandvas*, the pairs of opposites, the basic building blocks of signification, is productive of suffering (2:45, 4:22, 5:3, 7:27-28, 15:5). It claims that all observed multiplicity, differentiation and division is due to *māyā*, an unavoidable aspect of the manifestation of *prakṛti*,<sup>42</sup> and suggests instead that everything is one thing, that is, Kṛṣṇa. It strenuously objects to the reification of the categories by which language reformats the world.

There is a problem, though, because we cannot, after philosophical deliberation, replace our conventional language with one that is made to measure. It may be possible to do so in certain contexts, but passage between these contexts and conventional ones will then be difficult. How can one talk sense in a context which does not exist for such a purpose, and which thus only contains tools which bespeak nonsense? This is the

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<sup>42</sup> The text mentions *māyā* at 4:6d, 7:14b and d, 7:15c, and 18:61d. Zaehner 1969:183-184, 249 takes *māyā* to be a practical synonym for *prakṛti*, in line with *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4:10, which highlights *prakṛti*'s tendency to appear to be a multiplicity of interacting objects and forces when in reality it is just one entity currently in a state of internal dynamism.

problem faced by the *Bhagavadgītā*. The institutions which have grown up around the mistaken idea of the responsible agent-self do not allow for an easy exposition of determinism, because determinism can only be conventionally explained in terms which automatically imply its opposite. And, insofar as thoughts are speeches to oneself, linguistic consciousness will mitigate against being able to think about determinism properly. Because of the particular evolution of language, there are truths that we cannot know; or, at least, we could have no full idea or account of what it was we knew if we did know them. Hence the rarity and unpopularity (at least in other texts) of textual expositions of determinism:<sup>43</sup> such expositions are misleading and misunderstood, and are seen to be dangerous and subversive of structures and institutions of meaning. The *Bhagavadgītā* is certainly subversive: it begins with Arjuna, who knows it is wrong to kill his relatives, and provides him with a method of doing so without comeuppance. Subsequently, he not only kills them but does so in a most dishonourable fashion, and remains a 'goodie' right to the end. The dubious morality this implies has put many people off the text. This message is a narrative rather than a linguistic message and cannot be changed without changing the story, but the determinism expounded by the text is, insofar as it is linguistically presented, incapable of breaking free of the symbolic order within which 'I' is a responsible agent. Within this symbolic order, which is demonstrated by the context of the text's editors, the 'exposition of determinism', in order to signify, must be accessible in terms of the constructs of linguistic meaning, dualisms and hierarchies, the agent self and its progress as compared to that of others, and so *dehin* is biographised and conventional modes of understanding, including the idea of free will, are applied. The idea of the deterministic perspective was to look beyond *ahamkāra*, to equalise all persons as clockwork *dehin*-instantiators, but the demands of the linguistic symbolic system have occasioned a reification of the awareness of this perspective, so that persons are immediately split again into those who 'know thus' and those who do not, and *ahamkāra* is then applicable in terms of this dualism / hierarchy. This seems to be a problem of knowledge-types: there is, apparently, a *brahmavidyā* which is radically disrupted by the introduction of linguistic possibilities, the need then for the symbolic order, and the reduction of knowledge to the conventional use of the linguistic markers 'true' and 'false' with respect to statements such as 'the cat is in my garden'.<sup>44</sup> This is a clue to the connection between the search

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<sup>43</sup> The individual utterances in unrecorded conversations are texts in just the same way as ancient Indian texts and modern academic books are.

<sup>44</sup> Basham 1951:230: 'we may surmise that the *niyatīvādin* explained the apparent existence of freedom of choice by the postulate of a double standard of truth'.

for saving *jñāna* and the solitary life, which is visible throughout Indian literature.<sup>45</sup> The third and fourth *āśramas* in the Hindu scheme of life can be seen as a withdrawal from the social world corresponding to a withdrawal from the symbolic order, permitting a higher, non-linguistic knowledge to be attained before the critical hour of death comes (Edgerton 1926).

The idea that 'real truth' is unmarkable in discourse is borne out by the interpolatory scheme of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s history sketched in this thesis, in which philosophy was perverted for social ends. It is also present in the *Bhagavadgītā* in its use of the word *māyā*, and is later visible in the *avidyā* of the *Advaita Vedānta* and the *śūnyatā* of *Mādhyamika* Buddhism (Murti 1955:228-255, 311-328). These words point out the limitations of linguistic consciousness. Overall the text is quite coy about the accessibility of the saving knowledge: there is clearly a huge obstacle in the way, and often it seems as if to be a person is to be *sakta*, but nonetheless Kṛṣṇa insists that *jñāna* and, further, *asakta karman*, both happen in persons. Thus he admits that, due to the operation of the three *guṇas* / his *yogamāyā*, whatever is beyond the symbolic order is inaccessible to creatures (7:13, 25-26: verses 13 and 25 contain similar vocabulary, with identical endings to *pādas* c and d). Though *māyā* is what keeps the creatures mounted on the apparatus moving (18:61), nonetheless the limits of linguistic consciousness can be exceeded by those who resort to Kṛṣṇa (7:14cd). Even though these are extremely rare (7:3: only one out of thousands makes the attempt, of whom perhaps only one succeeds), they may be people of any socio-structural type (9:32). There seems to be a paradox here: 7:3 suggests that there has only ever been one totally Kṛṣṇa-knowing *asakta karmin*, but 4:10 says that many have banished the passions, known Kṛṣṇa and attained him. The paradox may be understood in this way. It is impossible to break out of the symbolic order altogether, since interaction involves manipulation of symbols, which will then play on in anyone who has interacted. But *asakta karman* and the *jñāna* of *prakṛti*, *dehin* and Kṛṣṇa are concerned with gradations of involvement in the symbolic order. Through *jñāna* one may appreciate its power, as if knowing that one can't break out but that, in some way, there *is* an (inexpressible) out, means that one is already less closed in, qualitatively even if not quantitatively. The quality of this less-closed-in-ness is private and unmarkable in the symbols of discourse, which must continue to represent the individual *as if* he or she were closed in. It is possible to witness actions, one's own and those of others, which seem so extraordinary or seem to

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<sup>45</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā* describes the *asakta karmin* as temperant in speech (12:19).

be discharged in such an extraordinary manner that one suspects a radical less-closed-in-ness is at work somewhere. But in such moments there is no way of representing the insight that does not obviously misrepresent it: it seems as if even representing in terms of action and person is a mistake here, and that the event indicates the existence of a mentality unencumbered by the construction of the individual person.

### 5.6. Ājīvikas and jīvanmukta

If, as Kṛṣṇa says, the attainment of *mokṣa* is likely to take a good deal of lifetimes, even after one has become aware of its possibility, then we have a scenario where, though *mokṣa* will only be attained very rarely, anyone can imagine themselves to be located within a life-chain that will eventually end. Kṛṣṇa guarantees to Arjuna that a *yogin* who does not achieve *saṃsiddhi* within the current life will always have another life, where he or she will be well placed from the start (6:37-45).<sup>46</sup> If time goes on for long enough, then surely *all* souls will end up in *mokṣa*. There are various ways of making the presence of *dehin* (and thus the objectification of the world) more than just a brief and singular episode in the world's history: there must be an inexhaustible repository of souls to replace those attaining *saṃsiddhi*, or there must be a way back into *saṃsāra* from *mokṣa*, or it must be admitted that there is no sense in speaking of *dehin* as singular, even though it is only instantiated singularly, in mysterious connection with a finite chain of lives in the world of process. *Mokṣa* soteriology and the encouragement of *mokṣa*-oriented activity fall apart if this admission is made (but *cittasamtāna* and *karmabandha* could be retained, with *parinirvāṇa* –final death– a curiosity), but both of the alternative theories have been developed within the Jain tradition: see P. S. Jaini (1980) and Dasgupta (1922:I.190) for *nigūḍhas*, 'hidden' souls which are gradually released to replace perfected ones, and Basham (1951:257-261) for *mokṣa* as a two-way valve. Notwithstanding the inevitability of eventual success, however, the chance of a specific person achieving *saṃsiddhi* before their death is infinitesimal.

Within this perspective, and given the background of determinism that we have been discussing, it is natural to put down the attainment of *mokṣa* to the operation of impersonal forces. If *kāla* is seen as ripening creatures for death, surely it is also

<sup>46</sup> *Mahābhārata* 12.271:52 explicitly states that when the night of *brahman* comes, *karmabandha* is stored in unmanifest form and re-activated the next morning. This idea is not mentioned, however, in the *Bhāgavadgītā*.

ripening souls for *mokṣa*. Such a view is represented in ancient India by the *Ājīvikas*, and is seen also at *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 2:23, where it is suggested that knowledge of *ātman* cannot be induced, coming, as it were, 'to whom it wishes'.<sup>47</sup> The vast majority of human beings will not break free of the delusions of *ahaṃkāra* and the ravages of desire and anger. Kṛṣṇa's ecumenism makes sense in that, whoever you are, 'it could be you', but an elite is constructed as soon as signs are hypothesised to identify the lucky ones.

Sanat Kumāra's address to Vṛtra and Uśanas, which Bhīṣma relates at *Mahābhārata* 12.271 (see above, 3.1), stresses the longterm view of *jīva*: 'just as a goldsmith, by repeated, self-executed effort, purifies a great item of beauty, likewise *jīva*, through hundreds of births, is easily purified by action' (11-12ab). Subsequently the number of possible births is extended almost indefinitely, and some sample careers are described. Since the only reason for rebirth at any point is outstanding *karmabandha*, there is no reason external to the *jīva*'s career which can explain why some *jīvas* might have longer careers than others. The only way to explain this, as has been argued above, is to regard all actions as events 'external' to the *jīva* and thus to explain the differentiation of *jīva*-careers as an anthropocentric overlay (useful for social and political purposes) onto the view that the world just does happen in exactly the way it does, from its beginning to its end.

This deterministic view, of the world as a complex but unitary four-dimensional object within which all events and actions are fully encased,<sup>48</sup> was contained in *Ājīvika* discourse by the word *niyati*.<sup>49</sup> Basham (1951) locates *Ājīvika* activity primarily within the sometime kingdoms of Kośala and Magadha, but says that their ideas were known by the Epic bards. He says (p. 284) that *niyati* 'represents a very real recognition of

<sup>47</sup> Kafka 1954:46: 'Theoretically there is a perfect possibility of happiness: believing in the indestructible element in oneself and not striving towards it'. The most important word of that sentence is its first: once such a theory comes into being one may perhaps strive to be a non-striver, and 'happiness', as well as 'possibility', may turn out to be *merely* theoretical.

<sup>48</sup> There are problems here concerning the beginning and end of time, because of a seemingly inevitable explanatory void. That things should start out a certain way at the dawn of the day of *brahman* stands in need of an explanation, which could be provided in terms of the way the previous day ended. In that case, the four-dimensional unit under scrutiny begins and ends with the first and last *brahman*-days ever. Any answer to the question 'why did things start in such a way?' must simultaneously explain everything that ever will happen. Time, indeed, may have to evaporate here, as if the joined-up patterning of physical causation could exist in a number of parallel sections, as if all days of *brahman* were connected head to tail but somehow simultaneous. Or, if the number and exact nature of individual *jīva*-colourings at the end of one *brahman*-day match those at the beginning of a *previous* day, the whole macro-system can be cyclic.

<sup>49</sup> When dealing with the *Ājīvikas* it is important to remember that the only surviving texts that give their views are those of their critics, chiefly Buddhists and Jains. Basham 1951 draws his data principally from the *Uvāsagadasāo* and the *Samyutta, Aṅguttara* and *Dīgha* Nikāyas.

orderliness in a universe on the human level apparently wholly unpredictable and disorderly'. Socio-economically, he correlates the rise of 'heterodoxies' (*nāstikas*) such as *Ājīvikism* with a new kind of civilisation and with the rise of organised kingdoms and institutions of government.<sup>50</sup>

The *Ājīvikas* discussed the attainment of *mokṣa* in terms of the end of a *karmic* chain: the chain only ends if *karmic* credit and debit are nil at the time of a person's death. This death is a final death, and as such is marked by special rituals, including a six month procedure of asceticism culminating in a ceremonious last drink and death by thirst. Having no *karmabandha* at all is an unlikely state of affairs in a person's life. If this eventuality happens to obtain at death, this may, more often than not, have been facilitated by such an ascetic procedure, in which the point at which prior *karman* runs out is followed, before the influx of further *karman*, by a death which needs no next life.<sup>51</sup>

It is easy to see how, if action as such is seen as generative of *karmabandha*, as in Jainism, then, unless immobility is practised, the precise timing of death will be critical in determining whether or not *karmabandha* is outstanding. The importance of the moment of death on the post-mortem progress of the *jīva* is mentioned in the *Bhagavadgītā* at 2:72, 7:30, 8:5-6, 9-10 and 13, and has been studied by Edgerton (1926),<sup>52</sup> who notes that the decisive importance of the last moment seems to contradict the idea that actions performed during life will determine rebirth. This may be taken as extra evidence that the doctrine of *karman* was interposed onto many different soteriological paradigms. The importance of thinking of or knowing Kṛṣṇa in one's final moment points to a gnostic soteriology slightly at odds with the idea of *asakta karman*.

<sup>50</sup> Jainism and *Ājīvikism* preserve indications of the existence of tribes whose way of life did not include killing. The belief that even plants have *jīvas* may suggest fruitarianism, not just vegetarianism: Mānki's bulls ran away (*Mahābhārata* 12.171), suggesting non-domestication of animals. The rise of pastoralism and agriculture would threaten the habitat of such tribes, untutored in food-production, who would find themselves radically opposed to a new society sustained by killing and united by *brāhmaṇical* ritual. In this situation such tribes must either die of starvation (hence ascetic suicide), change their ways, or become a class of beggars. Fruitarianism and the *kālavāda* are particularly affinitive: knowledge would be required of how cyclic time ripens different fruits at different times and in different places, and itinerant gatherers would soon be forced to interact with settlers, who would be struck by the idea of folk being sustained apparently without any effort (certainly without the showily heroic effort known as *puruṣakāra*), through knowledge of the workings of *kāla*. The presence of settlers, and the loss of the old way of life, might then similarly be explained in terms of *kāla*, as it is by the *Mahābhārata* in Arjuna's vision of Kṛṣṇa-*kāla*.

<sup>51</sup> It is easy to imagine such an ascetic procedure being followed 'just in case' *karmabandha* has run out, and thus many such procedures failing to coincide with *mokṣa*.

<sup>52</sup> Edgerton refers us also to *Śatapātha Brāhmaṇa* 10.6.3:1, *Praśna Upaniṣad* 3:9-10 and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.17:6.

Death normally follows a period of inactivity, and so being *asakta* in one's final hour would perhaps ordinarily be possible without applying Kṛṣṇa's technique, which is precisely tailored to a battlefield situation where many will die fighting for their lives. If the non-*samsāric* goal is to be available to warriors, this technique is called for: but once such a possibility exists, then a warrior, *asakta* and so ready to die in battle, may prevail and survive, and so be perfected before death, as it were. It is not necessarily the case that this possibility exists in the gnostic or physical-*karmic* analyses of death and *mokṣa*: the stress there is always upon what happens after death, as if the saving knowledge and the momentary expiry of all one's *karman* were only of note if and when they occur at a moment of death. But in the *Bhagavadgītā* the question is one of *sukha*: Arjuna is anxious about his post-war mental state, and it is this concern that Kṛṣṇa addresses. It is incidental to Arjuna that Kṛṣṇa's mental technique, if in use even when one dies, will lead to the avoidance of rebirth. And yet, with the transformation of the soteriological landscape that the theory of *asakta karman* makes possible, rendering renunciation of action unnecessary, a new problem appears, which is precisely the problem of *asakta karman*: if this perfected person is found doing the things that unperfected people do, in what can perfection consist? Only in these actions having different mental correlates: but we cannot understand them as actions except in conjunction with conventional, *ahaṁkāra*-based mental correlates. If the idea of *asakta karman* is taken seriously, then, the physical and mental components of action must be seen as separately as possible. As we have seen, the physical component of an action is to be understood in the widest possible context, as an arbitrarily highlighted subsection of the deterministic process of material existence. Likewise, the mental component of *asakta karman* must be seen in the widest possible context, as something that exists even though it is indescribable in conventional *ahaṁkāra* language, as something that is organised according to a different, simpler logic (see above, 4.1).

If Kṛṣṇa's technique can really be a technique, something that can become one's habitual mode of operation rather than an occasional, involuntary occurrence, then its successful application in a person's life denotes that, henceforth in the *cittasaṁtāna* in question, *karmabandha* will only be used up, never laid down. That such a person can be alive but not inactive is due to Kṛṣṇa's mental reinterpretation of *karmabandha*. The *jīvanmuktin's* mentality of action must be addressed if *asakta karman* is to make sense philosophically, whether *jīvanmukta* applies once-and-for-all or temporarily.<sup>53</sup> This

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<sup>53</sup> It may be imagined that the once-and-for-all possibility is more suggestive of having deliberately



mentality, as discussed earlier, is obscure. This makes it hard to believe that the philosophy can be turned into a methodology, a strategy for becoming a full-time *jīvanmuktin*. Many of the methodological suggestions given by the text are in terms of solitary and static mental exercises (6:10-32): when attaining the highest *brahman* is associated with the renunciative lifestyle, this methodology makes perfect sense, but as soon as Kṛṣṇa's reinterpretation throws up the possibility of *asakta karman*, there is a disjunction between the inactivity of the preparation for *asakta karman* and the activity of its operation. Śāṅkara's interpretation of *asakta karman* is shocking in this respect (see above, 2.1, 3.4): to avoid the problem of the socially active *jīvanmuktin*, he sees the technique of *asakta karman* as a preparatory discipline, upon success in which action will cease, leaving the *jīvanmuktin* statically absorbed in *jñāna*. Such a scheme is inapplicable to the *Bhagavadgītā*, where *asakta karman* is such that, if Arjuna kills Bhīṣma *asakta*, truly knowing Kṛṣṇa, but dies in so doing, his *cittasamāna* will cease at his death,<sup>54</sup> and where *asakta karman* is also such that, if Arjuna learns such a technique during the war and comes to *jñāna* through it, he can continue as a dutiful and worldly statesman within that *jñāna*.<sup>55</sup> The only way to revalorise the renunciative soteriological scheme to include the activity of the *jīvanmuktin* is to come to terms with *prakṛti* and determinism. This is to admit each action as a necessary event, and so to understand human behaviour in terms that can separate it totally from the normal, *ahamkāric* active mentality, and envisage it being accompanied instead by a qualitatively different mental environment, *prakṛti* being sure to effect the behaviours it requires of the person in any case. Such a revalorisation is radical, and would transform soteriology into an invisible process. There would then be no rationale for social ideological apparatus to deal with soteriology: the mundanity of that apparatus would be repeatedly re-enforced. But the *Bhagavadgītā* has been a religious text, which is to say that it has been used within a structure which purports to deal simultaneously with the mundane and the soteriological (mocking such a distinction and implying that there *is* no 'mundane' in this sense):

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chosen to strive for *jīvanmukta* than the temporary possibility: this is a fallacy. See Brodbeck and Pupynin 2001.

<sup>54</sup> There might be outstanding *karmabandha* from a previous life that would mitigate against this. On the whole, though, as Edgerton 1926 observes, the idea of *karmabandha* is not strictly applied: it appears as if attaining knowledge of Kṛṣṇa, *prakṛti* and *dehin* frees one from the *bandha* not only of current and future actions but of past ones too. Expiations of various kinds may also have this effect (see above, 3.3), but 'in the world, there is found no means of purification the like of knowledge' (4:38ab).

<sup>55</sup> This does not happen, because Arjuna, though apparently *asakta* enough in his wartime activities to prevent the accumulation of enormous guilt (the Pāṇḍavas' *aśvamedha* completes their post-war purification: see above, 3.3), subsequently forgets Kṛṣṇa's wisdom, and is a dutiful statesman without it until Kṛṣṇa's death prompts his retirement (*Mahābhārata* 16.9). Similar duties *could* be performed without having forgotten, just not there and then by Arjuna.

hence the history of the text's interpretation (that is, the text's conventional meaning) shies away from two of its crucial philosophical ideas, determinism and *jīvanmukta*.

Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* does not mention *jīvanmukta*, and the problem is not treated fully or consistently by its commentators (Rukmani 1999a:743-744). One of the conundrums here, as in *Sāṃkhya*, is that if one's lifespan is settled at the beginning of life according to previous *karmabandha*, then we can imagine a period of time between the attainment of *jñāna* and death. This is particularly so if one is deemed free to pursue and attain *jñāna* through one's own choice and effort. If this ideological intrusion were to be excised, we might say that there is no meaningful choice and that there is never a time lag between *jñāna* and death. This would solve the conundrum but would banish *asakta karman* into impossibility: *asakta karman* would then only be able to function as a theoretical limit that may be tended towards, *karman* being gradually less and less *sakta* without ever becoming fully *asakta*. This picture makes sense in terms of our discussion (above, 4.1) of the ascetic's total lack of interest even in the maintenance of his or her own life: if a human being is perfectly *asakta* then there are many *karman*s on offer which might indirectly cause death. Without institutions which categorise people as mentally ill or as criminals in order to justify (*i.e.* as a correlate of) restraining them, becoming fully *asakta* would quickly lead to accidental death unless one became inactive. We would thus expect a link between non-attachment and ascetic traditions on practical rather than philosophical grounds: only if inactivity were customary would radical non-attachment persist long enough to be 'observed', though death by thirst would then be the most proximate accident.

### 5.7. *Buddhiyoga* and *bhakti* as imagining all actions performed by one cosmic entity

The mechanics of the illusion of agency must be differentiated from the mechanics of activity in general. The latter, in both its human and non-human forms, is due to the imbalance and flow of the three *guṇas*, which, as outlined in the last two chapters of the *Bhagavadgītā*, are not psychological categories. Psychology is the stuff of *buddhi*, *manas* and *ahaṃkāra*, fuelled via the *indriyas* by the *indriyārthas*. The psychological condition of being *guṇasammūḍha* (3:19: confused by the *guṇas*, that is, ignorant of Kṛṣṇa's *jñāna*, under the illusion of agency, and generating *karmabandha*) is explained by the text as being sustained by the operation of *sprhā* (longing, 2:56b), *abhisneha* (passion, 2:57a) and *kāma* and *krodha* (desire and anger, 3:37a), which occurs when the

*indriyas* are not *niyukta* (3:36-43). Being *guṇasammūḍha* takes the form of attachment to the activities of the *guṇas* (3:29b), the fruits of actions, and the movement of the *indriyas* amongst the *indriyārthas* (5:9cd). Such attachment is described in terms of the *indriyas* ‘forcibly taking’ *manas* (2:60cd). It is characterised by *buddhi* being *bahuśākha* and *ananta* (many-branched and endless) as opposed to *eka*, *vyavasāyātmika* (single, composed of resolve, 2:41) and *niścala* (immovable, 2:53b). *Buddhināśa* (destruction of *buddhi*) at 2:62-63 is traced to thinking about the *viśayas*, the objects of sense-perception.

The forcible taking of *manas* by the *indriyas* seems to be the *raison d’être* of *manas*: without stimulus it would have nothing to work with. *Manas* is what the brain does, enabling an organism to respond to its environment in exceedingly subtle and complex ways. But the influx of *indriya*-stimuli is incessant while the person is ‘conscious’, and attention may be directed in certain ways for certain large-scale actional purposes only by controlling the response of *manas* to different stimuli. For example, one may listen out for a certain noise, and act in response to it, while effectively ignoring all other noises. In this case, manifold *indriya*-stimuli are being treated by *manas* in a controlled way. ‘What one is doing’ is of course always a spectrum of things, including killing unseen organisms and heating up the surrounding air, but *buddhi* is constituted by the report one gives oneself of one’s actions while acting, by the channelling of one’s attentions, which will monitor and control, via *manas*, the relative effects of different stimuli on one’s behaviour. Kṛṣṇa’s point to Arjuna is that Arjuna’s war-purposive *buddhi* has been inappropriately disrupted by the sight of his opponents, introducing what the text calls *buddhibheda* (splitting-of-*buddhi*: see 3:26a): the demands of *lokasamgrahadharmā* and *kuladharmā* call forth inimical *buddhis* in this situation. Similar situations recur, when one becomes intensely aware that there are seemingly unanswerable reasons not to do what there are seemingly unanswerable reasons to do.

The *buddhi* is fragile. It is inherently unstable, yielding quickly to disruption by new stimuli. When people change their mind about what they are doing, and abandon tasks half-completed, these can be instances of *buddhi* undergoing a kind of paradigm shift whilst remaining single, or they can instead be the destruction of *buddhi*. Kṛṣṇa’s insistence that singleness of *buddhi* is desirable is illustrated by Arjuna’s crisis. Were Arjuna *buddhiyukta*, he might have been able to swiftly, calmly and painlessly abandon

the war, notwithstanding his charioteers protestations:<sup>56</sup> instead his *buddhi* is temporarily split and lost, and this is the problem Kṛṣṇa addresses.

Kṛṣṇa's *buddhiyoga* is a process of concentration, focus, determination, so that a person's ability to achieve feats of action will not be diminished by any tendency to become distracted during the process. The text repeatedly picks out concern over the outcome of the action as the most likely distraction. There is a paradox here: to ensure success, stop caring about success. Similarly, to ensure the good of the person (*sukha*), stop caring about the good of the person (remove *kāma*). The paradox is only apparent, however, because of the difference between what is attained and what is imagined. The imagined success-in-action, shot through as it is by the flavours of triumph, glory and reward, imagined, that is, from an exclusively personal viewpoint, is of a different order from the success-in-action that is everyone doing their *dharma* and things turning out the way they should. Likewise the gratification of desires is different in kind from *sukha*. This again is the cleft between the imaginable and the actual, the epistemological and the ontological: what we think we are doing is no part of the world, but what we *are* doing, which sometimes includes thinking we are doing something 'else', is. People are not naturally constituted so as to envisage and pursue their personal-experiential best interests: from a biological determinist viewpoint, their psychological structure, amazing though it is, is constructed so as to ensure living long enough to reproduce successfully with the most socially valuable mate available. Crucially, success in heroic action, and the ensuing personal fame and glory, will make more socially valuable mates available. The internal mental health of the individual, in terms of *sukha*, is not any part of the equation. Instincts, and the actions that come naturally, are none of the business of the experiencing individual: they are the property of the gene pool and of the situation, even though an observer might say that 'So-and-so did it'. Instincts often lead to actions that, though disquieting the individual, are successful in conventional or genetic terms. From the biological determinist viewpoint, to be an *asakta karmin* is to allow one's instincts and internal programming to direct one's actions without thereby becoming mentally and personally involved in those actions, disturbed by them, defensive of them, responsible for them. After all, instincts were genetically selected in some cases many thousands of years ago, and, though they cannot be suppressed, they may be irrelevant for individuals in their current situation.<sup>57</sup> If all actions are put down

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<sup>56</sup> This example, because it is counterfactual, is impossible, as Arjuna's visions show, but nonetheless the point is clear.

<sup>57</sup> Houellebecq 2000 portrays competitive instincts, particularly in males, as historically explicable but,

to interaction between *svabhāva* and the current situation, then it is clear that neither of these are known in enough detail for a person to mentally map any particular action with much specificity, and nor is such a map necessarily required. If, contrarily, an action be put down to an autonomous individual agent-subject, then its mental correlates are pursued as its cause and explanation, and, though a highly detailed mental map (a 'possible world') might be given, so equally might many different others, and it becomes difficult not to switch between them. This, in short, is the difference between *eka* and *bahuśākha buddhis*, which, since one cannot exactly know the actual, unavoidable causes and consequences of one's actions, seems to leave the former contentless.

If the distinction between *prakṛti* and *dehin* is known by a person within and throughout their actions, this has implications for the way actions are mentally presented to the person. While it is usual to employ the discourses of agency and freedom and think in terms of 'what I am doing', the knowledge of *prakṛti*'s determinism and the inactivity of *dehin* will ensure mental presentation in the broader terms of 'what is happening with this body'. *Buddhi*'s account of the action, that is, the channelling of attention which controls the response of *manas* to different sensory stimuli, will thus include, for any action, a description of the action as determined to happen exactly as it is happening. Once this aspect of *buddhi* is in place, *buddhi* will simplify the psychological content of action, for, even if there then arise thoughts of 'what I am doing', the import of such thoughts is reduced: they are seen to be misguided explanations of the action, and, crucially, their occurrence figures as determined, merely another happening-with-this-body. The single *buddhi* is simple in that it can accommodate many possible accounts of 'what I am doing' for the same act, and even switch between them, without faltering in its control of *manas*. It is in this sense that *buddhi* can be *asakta* in action. The control of *manas* can take place without accounts of 'what I am doing', or despite them, but never because of them, for as soon as the account of 'what I am doing' is held to be causative of the action, attachment breaks in and *buddhi* will splinter. Because it views such accounts as trivial epiphenomena, the single *buddhi* is a more efficient channel of attention and control of *manas* than that which takes them seriously. It allows a maximum of mental focus to be directed on the activity in hand.<sup>58</sup> Without the interruptions caused by desire or aversion for this or that

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more recently, as damaging the contentment that might be gained from interaction with non-related persons of either gender.

<sup>58</sup> This takes the 'activity in hand' as a given, pre-decided event. Once there is some idea of what the

state of affairs, a composed and resolved *buddhi* will ensure the most skilful marshalling of a person's resources, resulting in the most situation-sensitive improvisation. In this sense, *asakta karman* denotes the ability to obtain the maximum practical profit from the possibilities inherent in *buddhi*. *Sukha* will then be twofold: at the time of acting, longing and aversion are absent, or at least heavily contextualised, and, in the sequel, the action will be efficient and lead to a congenial state of affairs.

The text states that the non-attached actor acts knowing that it is really *prakṛti* which acts. This mental resignation, this attitude of sharing one's action with its real agent, is the philosophical meaning of the word *bhakti* in the context of *asakta karman*.<sup>59</sup> 'Worship' and 'devotion' are vague, misleading and inappropriate translations for *bhakti* in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s philosophy, where what is referred to is a mental state understanding Kṛṣṇa to be the root cause and sufficient explanation of each and every one of one's actions. Some of the relational aspects of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* mentioned in the text are only made possible by the identification of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva with an anthropomorphised version of the root cause of the cosmos.<sup>60</sup> The text establishes *bhakti* of Kṛṣṇa as resulting in the bestowal of good upon the *bhakta*: this is clearly the case in some sense, because knowing *prakṛti* and *dehin*, one can act *asakta* and assure one's short and long-term future, but the idea should not be interpreted in terms of a responsive God engineering benefits in response to dutiful worship. The latter idea only works because human beings cannot know the future, only imagine it more or less mistakenly, yet it is somehow already there, as currently being

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activity is, mental focus can be directed upon it. If, as is being suggested, *prakṛti* be left to act through the person, without disturbing him or her, then activity need not be mentally represented as such, and mental activity-focus can be an empty set (vague ideas of *yajña*, *lokasaṅgraha* or 'God's will' do not constitute *focus* here). The problem then is that one does not know what one is doing or going to do. There are some actions it is hard to imagine taking place under these circumstances. We are not asked to imagine Arjuna fighting unknowingly, for example: he does not cease to recognise his relatives and *gurus*. Even if, as Kṛṣṇa says at 18:59-60, Arjuna would be impelled to fight by *prakṛti*, though he does not want to and is in some sense unwilling, he would still know what he was doing while fighting, he would be mentally representing his actions, perhaps more so than ever before. And what if he did actually fight *asakta*, free of *ahaṁkāra* and, as he says (18:73a), without *moha* (delusion)? This seems to mean he would have had no mental representation of the action even while acting. If no unit action is described, even internally, then the person's mental energy is most thoroughly plugged into the process of responding, through physical movement, to minute fluctuations in their physical environment. See above, 4.1.

<sup>59</sup> Though such an interpretation might be uncommon, see Hirst 1993:118, who warns against 'the assumption that we already know what *bhakti* is', urging us to 'guard against any view that *bhakti* is monolithic'.

<sup>60</sup> For example, those passages where Kṛṣṇa speaks of certain types of people as dear (*priya*) to him (7:17, 12:15-20, 18:69); this idea is contradicted by 9:29. See also below, 6.3. The perplexing person / God *avatāra* idea tends to confuse the notion of what the root cause is, anthropomorphising it beyond repair, and may enable nonsensical interpretations of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti*.

done by the world. It works, then, as a result of the mismatch between the time-boundedness of human consciousness and the eternity (every moment at once) of the actual actor, which is the cosmos as a four-dimensional unity.

The root of *bhakti* is *bhaj*, to share or divide. There is no difference between freedom from *ahaṃkāra*, a thoroughgoing acceptance of the *kālavāda*, *bhakti* of Kṛṣṇa, and resigning all *karmans* to him by means of consciousness of the *adhyātman* (3:30ab).

The *Mahābhārata* relates Indra's interviews with several *asura* kings who, though humiliated in battle and stripped of their assets, are untouched by grief. These kings explain that since everything that happens is fated, ill fortune must be borne without sorrow or self-recrimination (Bedekar 1992).

Prahlāda says (12.215:27-28):

'In the certainty that all beings here are predestined by *svabhāva*, what pride or arrogance will occur for the one aware? I know the entire rule of *dharma* and the transiency of all creatures: therefore, I do not grieve for all this that has an end'.

Vali says (12.217:7-8, 22):

'After death, life and the body come into existence together. They both grow together, they both perish together. I have merely obtained this particular condition without wishing to; on account of my understanding, there is no anguish if I am born thus... If I did not see that *kāla* destroys beings, then excitement, pride and anger could exist for me'.

Later he says (12.220:36-37):

'Speaking with unrefined *buddhi*, you do not understand. Some respect you greatly as one who has obtained pre-eminence by means of your own acts, but how can our kind, knowing the progress of the world, grieve [when] afflicted by *kāla*, or be confused in eagerness for profit?'

Before any of these utterances, Prahlāda is made out to have learned this philosophy from a *brāhmaṇa*, Ajagara, who told him (12.172:10-11):

'Seeing the groundless arising, deterioration, growth and disappearance of creatures, I do not rejoice nor am I sorrowful. Considering all manifestations to be proceeding from *svabhāva* and stopped by *svabhāva*, I do not suffer pain from anything'.

In these excerpts there is no reference to *bhakti*, but a recipe for grieflessness is given which involves the recognition of determinism. That the word *bhakti* does not feature in the *Bhagavadgītā* except in conjunction with *avatāra* and an extreme anthropomorphisation of *kāla* should not blind us to the fact that *bhakti*, with its idea of sharing, perfectly denotes the attitude of *asakta karmins* to the cosmos grounding their actions, irrespective of whether or not they know that Kṛṣṇa lies behind that cosmos. The *asuras* quoted seem to be *asakta karmins*: if they knew who Kṛṣṇa was, they would be *Kṛṣṇa-bhaktas*.

These conclusions are disturbing in that they seem to be the opposite of

Yudhiṣṭhira's in his response to Draupadī's exposition of *dhātr*. While he feared determinism would discourage action, here it seems to facilitate action and also to strip it of its psychological drawbacks. Chakravarty (1955:9-14) observes that 'fate is a tyrannous fact only if taken out of its context and misread'. 'Man... is in the hands of a destiny which he can neither elude nor defy', but 'the *Gītā* teaches that true freedom is obedience to the law of God... wisdom annuls fate by obeying it'. Hence

'the perfect life held up by the poet's art before man enables him to live in a distinct system of connections so thrilling and complete that everything there is relevant to everything else. The shapely order of experience thus becomes an ideal experience. For, anything in it, evil as well as good, is necessary to the design of the whole. The macrocosm is thus related to the microcosm. Man is instructed not to cut himself adrift from his surroundings'.

The idea that any occurring evil is necessary seems to be a moral outrage in some quarters, but Chakravarty's interpretation is refreshing in its willingness to dispense with the freedom of the will, whose retention, cutting people adrift from their surroundings, is not compatible with understanding what the text means by *asakta karman*. In a similar vein Katz, after acknowledging that human action is generally morally ambiguous, remarks (1989:226) that 'the *Gītā*, rather than advocating the employment of heroic action against fate (a strategy that cannot succeed for humans), favours submission to fate and its transformation at the level of devotion; this is its most impressive teaching to Arjuna'. Also illustrative here is Scott (1982:58): 'in the acceptance of inevitability one draws closer to the pure light of divinity in its absence from all personal intent'.

To illustrate further that determinism / *bhakti* does not lead to inactivity, it is worth invoking once more the *Mahābhārata*'s discussion of *daiva* and *puruṣakāra* (Katz 1989:178-179, 194). Vassilkov (1999:24) suggests the following analysis: successful action depends on the conjunction of effort (*puruṣakāra*) and external factors (*daiva*), but the latter are unpredictable, and hence effort must always be made in case external factors facilitate success, failure being borne philosophically on occasions when they do not.<sup>61</sup> This scenario may be taken as prescriptive or as descriptive: generally, 'they might not be there' is not used as a public reason for not telephoning somebody. The possibility, even likelihood, of the failure of actions which are nonetheless pursued in good faith, leads to a reluctance to get one's hopes up, which may be seen as the anticipatory counterpart of the ability to bear disappointment. In this way, as Vassilkov observes (p. 31), the lack of personal control over the world stressed

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<sup>61</sup> This would perhaps also be the philosophy of the hard-line *karmic* physicalist caricatured earlier, taking a fast-unto-death not quite knowing the exact state of their *karmic* balance.



by the *kālavāda* has its counterpart in detachment from the fruits of action, the touchstone of Kṛṣṇa's *karmayoga*.

At *Mahābhārata* 5.75 Kṛṣṇa makes a speech about *daiva* and *puruṣakāra*: he says that the differentiation of these two event-causes is always problematic. He makes three particular observations: any human action, howsoever well thought out, may be frustrated by *daiva*; human action may effect changes in what seems to be a *daiva*-given situation; and human action may succeed, unhindered by *daiva*. Without deconstructing *puruṣakāra* as *daiva*, Kṛṣṇa here provides a rationale for continued activity without excessive expectation of the proposed outcome. Vassilkov's observations are here borne out, and the connection with Kṛṣṇa's *Bhagavadgītā* theory of disinterested action is clear. The necessity of continued effort is explained by the ignorance of the protagonist concerning whether or not what he / she has in mind is an accurate prediction. There is room in this scenario for a higher-order fate: the *daiva* of Kṛṣṇa's first observation seems to be a less anthropocentric idea than that of his second, and this higher-order fate could then encompass the successful activity of the third observation, reducing its idea of *daiva* (that which might have hindered what in fact was successful) to an anthropocentric fantasy. The discussion of *puruṣakāra* and *daiva* in the *Mahābhārata* can only take the form it does because two completely different ideas are given the same label '*daiva*': on the one hand, what we would like to call fate, that which just will happen, despite or by means of the activity of persons, and, on the other, that which we imagine would have happened if we hadn't done what we did, which deserves no name at all since it does not exist.

The word *bhakti* in the *Bhagavadgītā* denotes the derivation of an affirmative and participatory attitude to action from the philosophy of determinism. Insofar as such philosophy is still academically visible as philosophy (rather than as popular science or psychology), it has also made such an attitudinal derivation. Hence Honderich (1993:107-115), noting that 'the real problem of determinism and freedom is the finding or making of a *satisfactory* response to the likely truth of determinism', goes on to suggest that we 'accommodate ourselves to the part of our lives which does not rest on the illusion of free will'. This is a response of affirmation:

'to try to make the response of affirmation is to try to arrive at one part of what is rightly called a philosophy of life... a philosophy of life consists in feelings in which we can persist, feelings which give us some support and which are as satisfactory as truth will allow... There is certainly a particular sense in which determinism enables us to identify with nature, or, as might even be said, to regard ourselves as having membership in nature... determinism is unique in asserting that we stand in a close and unproblematic connection with nature... Determinism, it might be supposed, is indeed a way to tranquillity'.

Honderich's analysis of the psychological implications of the philosophy of determinism matches the *Bhagavadgītā*'s analysis of the psychological implications of disabling *ahaṁkāra*. The idea of free will goes together with the idea of an action-originating self called 'I'. Just as Kṛṣṇa's *jñāna* can subvert Arjuna's future grief, 'determinism offers the compensation of an escape from a mordant kind of self-dislike and self-disapproval'. Negative attitudes to the self are based on the idea that a grammatical entity could or should have done otherwise. They thus simultaneously service two false ontologies, both of them reified human epistemologies.

As well as being the originator (4:1-3) and communicator of the technique of *asakta karman*, Kṛṣṇa is also its most excellent practitioner. This chapter will investigate Kṛṣṇa's attitude to action, which he sums up as follows: 'For me there is nothing to be done, nothing in the three worlds unobtained [but] to be obtained; even so I move in *karman*' (3:22); 'Actions do not stain me. I do not delight in the fruit of actions. Whoever perceives me in this way is not bound by *karmans*' (4:14). Textually, the claim that Kṛṣṇa acts *asakta* is intended to provide an example for people to follow, a guide to acting *asakta*, as well as a guarantee both of the possibility and of the utility of so acting.

It is troublesome to study Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* because, although he is a character in the narrative like many others, that is, a *kṣatriya* with a network of class and kinship loyalties which inform and frame his actions, he is at one and the same time God Almighty, as revealed particularly in the theophanies of *Bhagavadgītā* 11 (to Arjuna alone) and of *Mahābhārata* 5.129 (to Duryodhana and the Kaurava assembly).<sup>1</sup> There is thus the possibility of referential ambiguity whenever Kṛṣṇa is mentioned. Information about Kṛṣṇa gathered from the text will take the dual form of being a character study and a theology.

As far as the present study is concerned, the dual nature of Kṛṣṇa is troublesome because when he claims to be *asakta* in his actions, this may refer to two types of actions. Firstly, the actions which he performs as part of the narrative, such as urging the Pāṇḍavas to win the war by cheating, and expounding *asakta karman* in order to persuade Arjuna to fight (which, after all, are actions which may be performed by non-divine people), and, secondly, the actions which he performs as the Almighty, that is, the creation of the universe and the enabling of every event within it. The text has a mechanism of sorts for bridging the gap between these two modes of Kṛṣṇa, namely the *avatāra* theory of 4:7-8,<sup>2</sup> which explains Kṛṣṇa's human actions in terms of his divine personality: 'Whenever there arises an exhaustion of *dharma*, a rise of *adharmā*, then I

<sup>1</sup> There are also theophanies at *Mahābhārata* 10.6 (to Aśvatthāman), 12.51 (to the dying Bhīṣma) and 14.54:3-8 (to the sage Uttānka). See Laine 1989, Hildebeitel 1976:126-127.

<sup>2</sup> This idea has been widely denoted by the word *avatāra*, even though the *Bhagavadgītā* does not use the term. Oddly, although *dharma* is represented as declining progressively through the four *yugas* and being replenished for the next cycle beginning with the *kṛtayuga* (see for example *Mahābhārata* 3.188:10-12, *Manusmṛti* 1:81-82), the *kaliyuga* is often said to begin at around the time of the *Mahābhārata*'s events (Pargiter 1922:175-177, Aiyer 1987:36, 38).

send myself forth. For the rescue of the honest and the destruction of the wicked, for the sake of the regulation of *dharma*, I am born in age after age’.

This chapter will approach Kṛṣṇa’s claim to be a non-attached actor in three sections. First of all, the claim will be assessed as a comment on the way Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva behaves. This will involve ignoring Kṛṣṇa’s specifically divine actions. After a brief survey of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva’s activities, it will be shown that they are perfectly compatible with his being non-attached, although, since the narrators of the Epic do not tend to comment on characters’ inner lives, they cannot be proved to be *asakta* actions. The evidence in this section is drawn entirely from the *Mahābhārata*: I have ignored the *Harivaṃśa* and the Purāṇas, as they seem to belong to a different tradition.

The second section will assess Kṛṣṇa’s claim in terms of his divine actions. It will show that it is very hard to make sense of the claim as theological. This is because, as introduced in the text, the notions of being *asakta* and *sakta* are explained in terms of human action: these are anthropocentric notions and do not easily transfer to God except by anthropomorphising him to the point of meaninglessness. Since Kṛṣṇa Almighty (henceforth KA) and a human person cannot be *asakta* in comparable ways, it is far from clear what use KA’s non-attachment might be in trying to persuade Arjuna to act *asakta*.

The final section of the chapter will combine the findings of the first two sections by exploring the notion of *avatāra*, the link between Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva and KA. Various interpretations of this notion will be explored, leading to the conclusion that, as presented in the text, it is barely intelligible and confuses the argument. A philosophically consistent interpretation of *avatāra* is possible only by taking liberties with the text. The claim of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity will be sited in its historical context, and it will be shown how the text’s socio-religious purpose, by involving the deification of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, has interfered with its presentation of his human-attitudinal political philosophy. The philosophical ruptures caused by this socio-religious purpose demonstrate that the text has been re-worked and interpolated.

### 6.1. The actions of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva

For almost the entire narrative of the *Mahābhārata*, Kṛṣṇa’s divinity is not a theme expounded by the narrating bards Saṃjaya, Vaiśampāyana or Ugraśravas. When the

subject comes up, it is generally kept at the level of the characters in the drama. Throughout the war Kṛṣṇa's divinity serves as a provocative rumour,<sup>3</sup> underpinning the Pāṇḍavas' hope that they can win even though outnumbered, and the Kauravas' fear that they might lose even though outnumbering. Kṛṣṇa is certainly an extraordinary character: it is only through his encouragement that the Pāṇḍavas have the confidence to take on the Kauravas, and only because of his strategic advice that they manage to overcome them. As far as the main story is concerned, Kṛṣṇa is special first and foremost because it is he who makes the difference between the two sides: hence 'where there is Kṛṣṇa, there is victory' (*Mahābhārata* 6.21:12d).

Why does Kṛṣṇa take such interest in these family squabbles? Perhaps because it is his extended family as well: he is a first cousin of the three eldest Pāṇḍavas, his father Vasudeva being Kuntī's brother. But this is not the kind of dispute in which one must side with one's cousins, it is a dispute between cousins. At *Mahābhārata* 5.5:3 Kṛṣṇa claims that he owes the same loyalty to the Kauravas as to the Pāṇḍavas, a claim also made by Duryodhana at *Mahābhārata* 5.7:10. Kṛṣṇa is neutral: neither he personally nor his tribe stand to gain from the outcome. Arjuna is embroiled in a terrific mess, his honour at stake, his wife abused and his estate confiscated: he is necessarily involved in the war, but Kṛṣṇa is detached enough to act as a mediator. Kṛṣṇa is the second of the three envoys between the sides in the run-up to the war, and works hard to try to reason with Duryodhana. Baladeva Vāsudeva, Kṛṣṇa's half-brother, avoids taking sides and does not participate in the war. Kṛṣṇa has this option but turns it down. Baladeva's non-participation can be compared to the renunciation of action which Kṛṣṇa's *karmayoga* positions itself in opposition to. In taking part, albeit only as Arjuna's charioteer, Kṛṣṇa is embodying one of the basics of his theory of *asakta karman*, that inactivity should be shunned. But how does Kṛṣṇa conceive of his activity, given that he does not stand to gain? What is he participating *for*? For love of Arjuna, the left-handed archer?

Kṛṣṇa's private cogitations on this matter are not explored by the Epic as much as we might like. Whereas a novel may easily enter the brains of its characters, and explore their most hidden motivations and feelings in the third person, this is not the style of the *Mahābhārata*. Oral Epics are the record of what one text-giver has heard from another, and their heroes are presented from the viewpoint of a close witness of their speech and action. Hence the charioteer was the eulogiser of heroes and their martial feats: the *sūta*

<sup>3</sup> At *Mahābhārata* 12.271, when the war is over, Yudhiṣṭhira asks Bhīṣma whether or not Kṛṣṇa is the highest Lord.

was text-giver and charioteer, these functions presumably being simultaneously discharged when a warrior on the battlefield would be encouraged by his pilot's tales. The generic conventions evolved accordingly. This can be seen most clearly in the *Bhagavadgītā*'s presentation of Arjuna's crisis when he sees the two armies ready for battle (1:27c-2:9). Arjuna describes his reaction predominantly in terms of its physical marks: dry mouth, trembling body, bristling hair, burning skin. A commentary on these physical circumstances is given, but this commentary is second-hand, not directly from Arjuna's viewpoint but from that of Saṁjaya, who has heard what he said. In Epic, the presentation of mental events is almost an empty set: emotions and attitudes are present only insofar as they are inferred from observable behaviours and utterances. Hence, in the absence of any speeches of his own on the subject, the question of what motivates Kṛṣṇa is a difficult one.

It is possible, however, to reconstruct a political philosophy embodied by Kṛṣṇa's behaviour. This work has been done most thoroughly by More, who tries to unite Kṛṣṇa's philosophy with his *kṣatriya* biography as given in the *Mahābhārata*, and argues (1995:19-21) that his divinity grew out of popular respect for this philosophy. More presents Kṛṣṇa's political vision as anti-imperialistic and based on the principle of local autonomy (see above, 4.3). Particularly important in this regard is More's analysis of Yudhiṣṭhira Pāṇḍava's *rājasūya yajña*, performed under Kṛṣṇa's instigation and supervision, in which he highlights the defeat of the expansionist Jarāsaṁdha and the reinstatement of the local chieftains he had imprisoned. Kṛṣṇa's people, the Yādavas, have lost their ancestral lands and been forced to relocate to Dvāraka thanks to Jarāsaṁdha (*Mahābhārata* 2.13), so Kṛṣṇa has first-hand experience of the disruptive effect such expansionism can have, and his removal of Jarāsaṁdha with the assistance of the Pāṇḍavas is presented by More as a matter of principle rather than just the settling of an old score. As Kṛṣṇa says to Jarāsaṁdha: 'We, attendant to the afflicted, have come here for the sake of occasioning the prosperity of [our] relations, to restrain you, the cause of their ruin' (*Mahābhārata* 2.20:12). Duryodhana is cut from the same cloth as Jarāsaṁdha, being keen to annexe the territory of others and defend it militarily. Kṛṣṇa, having replaced an imperialist with a federalist, now sees that federalist threatened by another imperialist, and steps in.

Though More might be criticised as anachronistically reconstructing Kṛṣṇa's politics from a modern humanistic perspective, I think it is perfectly possible to explain that politics in the context of ancient India. The *Mahābhārata* was created in the context

of population expansion, urbanisation, and increasing social interaction between groups. Centralisation and subjugation would have been live issues: tribal ways of life would have been subject to disturbing and often violent interactions. It is against this background, and in response to Jarāsaṁdha, that Kṛṣṇa's ideas of *lokasaṁgraha* are to be understood. He views an ideal, prosperous life as dependent on an idealised network of reciprocal, respectful and mutually beneficial interactions with one's close kin and other social groups as well as with the *devas*. Kṛṣṇa's activism is conservative: he wants to ensure the continuity of existing human ecologies (*lokas*), which he sees as being newly vulnerable to disruption by *varṇa* miscegenation (1:38-44), by removal of locally traditional power structures, and by negligence of oblations to the *devas* (3:10-11).

Because *lokasaṁgraha* is of great value, great pains must be taken, when necessary, to remove the disruption threatening it. As More explains, Kṛṣṇa appreciates that the end justifies the means: he urges the Pāṇḍavas to resort to dastardly tricks in order to defeat their enemies, disregarding existing conventions of chivalry. He thus has a flexible attitude to *dharma* (see also *Mahābhārata* 12.70:31, 12.259:4). Duryodhana justifies his aggressive imperialism by citing Bṛhaspati, saying that the quest for victory takes him above *dharma* and *adharmā* (see above, 3.2). Likewise Kṛṣṇa, to counter that imperialism, rises above the *dharmas* of chivalry, depending instead on *nīti*,<sup>4</sup> a situation-sensitive, improvisatory strategic sense. It seems that some aspects of *kṣatriyadharmā* were out of date: armies had become larger, weaponry more advanced, and more was now at stake.

More's account of Kṛṣṇa's political philosophy is plausible both textually and historically, providing an explanation of his activity in terms not of short-term or personal goals but of maintaining the background conditions for satisfactory human existence. It matches very well with the attitude Kṛṣṇa urges Arjuna to adopt. However, this political philosophy of Kṛṣṇa's is never made fully explicit by the *Mahābhārata*, which, in accounting for Kṛṣṇa's involvement in the war, implies his friendship with Arjuna just as strongly. Kṛṣṇa, in encouraging the Pāṇḍavas to insist upon the return of their kingdom, appeals more readily to their *kṣatriya* honour than he does to the political implications of their not doing so. Likewise earlier, when he co-opted them to remove Jarāsaṁdha, he sold the scheme to them on the basis of benefits to their status and prestige within the *kṣatriya* community, rather than by expounding his political vision.

<sup>4</sup> The word does not occur in the *Bhagavadgītā*, but is certainly applicable to Kṛṣṇa's methods, and is discussed at *Mahābhārata* 12.59 and in the *Arthaśāstra*. See Kangle 1965:3-6.

Because this *ad hominem* verbal behaviour is fully explicable as Kṛṣṇa's *nīti*, More's reconstruction of his political philosophy, though faultless, is nowhere actually demonstrable. Hence we cannot simply conclude that Kṛṣṇa perceives all his actions in terms of *lokasaṃgraha*, and is thus *asakta*. Even were Kṛṣṇa to expound the philosophy outlined above, this would not tell us about his attachment or lack thereof. Perhaps it would lead us to imagine that he is particularly attached to a certain philosophy. Or perhaps, again, it would lead us to imagine that he is appealing to laudable-sounding principles as cover for his attachment to the Pāṇḍavas, Arjuna in particular. In a way, *not* talking about his motivations suggests that Kṛṣṇa could be *asakta*, for the non-attached actor is said to be without personal motives. The nature of the Epic genre is one reason why we cannot assess the claim that Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is *asakta*. The other is the nature of non-attachment, which Kṛṣṇa insists is not behaviourally marked: 'as the unknowing ones, attached to action, act, just so should the knowing, unattached one act, desiring to effect *lokasaṃgraha*' (3:25). The difference made by a person being *asakta* is of three kinds: the difference it makes in the quality of the person's experience of life, the difference it makes to whether or not their death is followed by rebirth, and the difference it makes to whether or not they manage significantly to stem the threats posed to the world's optimum functioning, both cosmic and social. All these differences, for varying reasons, are extremely hard to identify.

## 6.2. The actions of Kṛṣṇa Almighty

Kṛṣṇa refers on several occasions to his specifically divine actions as *asakta*:

'The four *varṇas* were sent forth by me, divided in actions and in qualities. Know me, though the doer of this, as the imperishable non-doer. Actions do not stain me. I do not delight in the fruit of actions. Whoever perceives me in this way is not bound by actions' (4:13-14).

'All creatures go to my *prakṛti* at the quietening of the *kalpa*: I emit them again at the beginning of the *kalpa*. Resting on my own *prakṛti* I emit again and again this entire village of creatures unwisely, controlled by [my] nature. Those acts do not bind me, seated indifferently and unattached in them' (9:7-9).

By the time the idea that people must emulate God's manner of acting is introduced, the text has already set out an understanding of human *asakta karman*. Does the idea of God's being *asakta* add anything to this understanding, or does it confuse it? This question will be explored in relation to several of the points Kṛṣṇa has made about human action.

The first of Kṛṣṇa's philosophical arguments concerns the distinction between



*deha*, the perishable body, and *dehin*, the imperishable one-in-the-body, in light of which every bodily circumstance, howsoever delightful or horrifying, is trivial, and hence should not be a basis for attachment (2:12-25, 29-30). The text deconstructs God, as well as the human being, into component parts, using the distinction between *deha* and *dehin*. The most explicit example of this move in Indian thought is Rāmānuja's theory that the world is the body of God.<sup>5</sup> The *Bhagavadgītā*, as we shall see, lends partial support to this theory.

7:4-5 differentiates KA's lower *prakṛti* from his higher *prakṛti*. His lower *prakṛti* is *prakṛti* as ordinarily thought of, the basis of material existence made up of the three *guṇas*. His higher *prakṛti* is *jīvabhūta*. Van Buitenen translates this as 'the order of souls', but it could also mean 'consisting of life': what is apparently denoted is a non-*prakṛtic* element of living organisms, that is, *dehin*. So that which from a human viewpoint is called *puruṣa* is merely a part of KA's *prakṛti*: at 15:7 he calls it 'a particle of myself'. It is in this sense that Kṛṣṇa refers to himself as 'the knower of the field in every field' (13:3ab): he is the *dehin* of every *deha* in the double sense that not only is the human *deha* his *deha* because he is the *dehin* of all *prakṛti*, but also that the individual *dehin* is he himself, comprising *jīvabhūta* as his higher *prakṛti*. But the logic of 2:12-25 and 29-30, where it is stressed that the *prakṛtic* element of the human being is not to be overly heeded, is applied also to KA, and hence the text stresses that the real character of KA is to be found in the *puruṣottama*, that aspect of him which stands apart from the creative process, the higher and lower *prakṛtis*, as *dehin* stands apart from the human psychophysical organism. By analogy to KA's higher and lower *prakṛtis*, the psychic and the physical would here correspond, respectively, to the higher and lower *prakṛtis* of the human being. The *puruṣottama* is described at 8:20-22<sup>6</sup> and 9:4-5 as *avyakta* (unmanifest), but it is differentiated from the *avyakta* that is *prakṛti* in its potential, unevolved state.<sup>7</sup> 15:16-18 makes the same point, that KA transcends both

<sup>5</sup> See Lipner 1986:39ff., 85-86. Lipner traces the idea to *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7:15.

<sup>6</sup> 8:20 presents the existence of the *puruṣottama* as logically necessary to explain the repeated setting-in-motion of cosmic evolution. A similar idea is preserved in the developed *Sāṃkhya darśana*, which sees *puruṣa* as the inactive instigator of the cosmic process (see, for example, *Sāṃkhya Kārikā* 31). The metaphor of copulation between the *puruṣottama* and the *avyakta prakṛti* is never far away: Chattopadhyaya 1959 makes much of this as he traces the *Sāṃkhya* system to non-Vedic, proto-Tantric contexts. The gender politics of the copulative cosmogony are important: see A. Collins 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Van Buitenen 1981:166 differentiates *avyakta* ('the description of *prakṛti* in germinal state') from *Avyakta* ('an order of being completely transcendent to the creatures', that is, *puruṣottama*). His interpretation is the natural one here: the ambiguity arises because the text is punning on the adjective *avyakta* by missing out the nouns that it qualifies.

*dehin* and the stuff of *deha*.<sup>8</sup> With this claim, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s theology goes beyond cosmotheism. It follows that knowledge, to be truly liberating, must extend to this transcendent, acosmic aspect of KA.<sup>9</sup> An anthropomorphised cosmos is a recurring feature of Indian cosmology, and is seen in Jainism as well as in *Rgveda* 10.90 where, interestingly, there is some tension between the view that the cosmos contains all the dismembered parts of the primal person (verses 11-14) and the view that the cosmos is only a fraction of the primal person (verse 1cd: 'he totally covers the earth and overlaps a distance of ten fingers beyond it'; verse 3cd: 'all creatures are one quarter of him, three quarters of him are the immortal in heaven').

The analogy between KA and the human being is taken further. Just as *dehin* passes through a series of different embodiments, so the cosmic expression of the *puruṣottama* is cyclic. 8:17-19 describes successive cosmic emissions as days of *brahman*. The *avyakta prakṛti* connects the end of one cosmic cycle to the beginning of the next, being the raw material out of which the world is fashioned: in the same way successive embodiments of *dehin* are connected by a subtle body, mentioned at *Bhagavadgītā* 15:7-8 as consisting of the *indriyas* and *manas*, aspects of *prakṛti* which, in the interim between *dehas*, are in an unmanifest state. The night of *brahman* has no temporal counterpart from the micropersonal perspective, however, as the text does not mention any time lag between successive *dehas* of a *karmically* coherent life-chain: instead, at *Mahābhārata* 3.181:24 Mārkaṇḍeya states that rebirth follows death immediately. Another weakness of the analogy is that *dehin* may attain *mokṣa* and escape rebirth, whereas Kṛṣṇa does not suggest any end to the succession of days of *brahman*.

As far as *asakta karman* is concerned, the prospect of an enormous number of embodiments, which in the human case follows from the knowledge of the distinction between *deha* and *dehin* and which, according to Kṛṣṇa, should prompt detachment in people, can easily be imagined to have the same effect on KA. The essential aspect of

<sup>8</sup> 15:16-18 has been variously interpreted. My interpretation is shared by Hill 1928:240-241 (approved by A. Sharma 1986:78), but differs from those of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja and Zaehner. The latter (1969:366-367: see also Patel 1991:118-121) objects to *prakṛti* being called a *puruṣa*, and sees the two lower *puruṣas* as representing liberated and bound *dehins*. The conflict here is between *puruṣa* as a *Sāṃkhyan* technical term, and the *Bhagavadgītā*'s use of the word, which is often not philosophical, and is sometimes best translated simply as 'person'. It is surely desirable to interpret this passage in line with the ideas of 7:4-5 and 8:20.

<sup>9</sup> See also *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1:10: '*Pradhāna* (primary matter) is perishable, the bearer [*i.e. dehin*] deathless and imperishable. The one God commands both the perishable and the *ātman*. Through meditation on him, through *yoga*, and, moreover, through [his] being a *tattva* (real thing), in the end there is cessation of all trickery'.

KA is separate from any cosmos he might happen to be currently facilitating, and hence the details of that cosmos are, to him, quite trivial. This claim is not explicitly made by the text but is implied by the analogy explored above. It is threatened by some interpretations of the *avatāra* theory, which see God as intimately interested in the particular development of the cosmos. These will be discussed and dismissed anon: for the present it is enough to note that the *deha / dehin* distinction is a crucial part of the theory of *asakta karman*, and that the text applies it to this end with respect to the actions both of human beings and of KA.

The analogous concepts of *dehin* and *puruṣottama*, though they are referred to by the text as the essential, real and true aspect of the human being (2:12-13) and the cosmos (8:20-22, 15:17-18) respectively, are actually very tricky concepts, both being a reified logical priority. Buddha argued against the reification of *karmic* and psychophysical continuity into a self or *ātman* (S. Collins 1982), and similarly the *Bhagavadgītā* argues against the reification of any particularisable things, any aspects of *prakṛti*, into an *ātman*: this is the delusion of *ahaṃkāra*, whereas *dehin* is wholly different, non-identifiable, non-phenomenal, a mere subjectness. Buddha's philosophical refusal to deal with *ātman* is mirrored by his agnostic atheism, for *puruṣottama* as described above is uncanny in the same way as *dehin* is: it is no 'this', rather it is that without which no 'this' can be imagined. The *Bhagavadgītā* takes this logical primacy seriously, presents it as an ontological primacy, and says that human beings have no option, if they are to truly know, other than thinking in terms of *dehin* and *puruṣottama*, howsoever subtle these ideas are. Buddha's approach explains consciousness-*of* as a function of an ideologically and linguistically constructed subject 'I', but leads to the position where there can be nothing to be truly known, no ontology. A post-structuralist approach would take the same line, but the *Bhagavadgītā* instead explains the constructed subject as a function of consciousness-*of*.

The methodology of *asakta karman* which Kṛṣṇa proposed to Arjuna was premised on a certain analysis of the human being. A human body exists within a consubstantial environment, with which it interacts through the *indriyas*: *manas*, *ahaṃkāra* and *buddhi* are the psychological powers through which sensory input is analysed and appropriate activity initiated. In the case of *asakta* action, *buddhi* will be single (2:41): this involves concentrating solely on the action at hand without considering the possible results of its success or failure. Consideration of possible results brings desire and anger into play, and these destroy both the efficiency of the

action and the mental state of the actor (2:41-71). Singleness of *buddhi* is allied to the presentation of one's actions to oneself in terms of *dharmā*, *yajña* and *lokasaṃgraha* (3:9-16, 19-21, 25-26). Being a recipient of existence and sustenance from the world, it is meet to 'make the wheel thus set in motion roll onwards' (3:16): the *loka* (inclusive of *devas*) sustained by *dharmic* human action is necessary in order that humans may continue to exist (see above, chapter four). *Dharma* here is a practical notion, not a transcendental one: *lokasaṃgrahadharmā* follows from the specificities of the *loka*.

If KA is *asakta* in a fashion that may illuminate human attempts to be so, then we would expect him to have a single, focused *buddhi* and a *manas* unpolluted by desire or anger. However, in the text there is little suggestion that KA has a psychological complex made up of *ahaṃkāra*, *manas* and *buddhi* in the way that human beings have. KA is said to have *manas* at 10:6: he brought the seven ancient *ṛṣis* and the four Manus into existence by means of it. *Manas* in human beings is not such that it can bring things into being: here Kṛṣṇa employs a cosmological use of the term, which may be historically older, but which does not sit easily with the text's predominantly psychological usage. *Manusmṛti* 1:53d states that during the night of *brahman*, when Brahmā is asleep, '*manas* becomes languid'. The re-awakening of *manas* corresponds to the dawning of another day, when the cosmos comes into being again through the activity of the *ṛṣis*, which constitutes the non-languidness of *manas*.<sup>10</sup> In these passages *manas* seems to represent the unmanifest *prakṛti*, rather than being a cosmic faculty of *puruṣottama* cogitating about the events of the world as they are happening. Since there is an infinity of successive universes, we may say that the *puruṣottama* would have an *asakta* attitude to any particular goings-on within one universe, but it has no location for this attitude, for the location of *asakta*-ness in human beings is not *dehin* but the psychological complex, part of *prakṛti* (3:7, 19, 25, 13:9, 18:49).<sup>11</sup> At first it seems that this is paradoxical, since the thrust of the *deha* / *dehin* distinction is that *dehin* is by definition unattached to *deha* or to the wider *prakṛtic* world (13:14 describes 'that which is to be known', *i.e.* *dehin*, as *asakta*). But for a person to be non-attached requires the knowledge of *dehin* and of *dehin*'s non-attachment, the healthy results of which knowledge take place in the mental space of the person, whose *buddhi* and *manas* then reflect the non-attachment of *dehin*. As long as *puruṣottama* is conceived on the model of *dehin*, it will similarly be non-attached by definition, which puts it in a

<sup>10</sup> In *Manusmṛti* there are ten *ṛṣis* and eight Manus, seven of which are subordinate to the first one.

<sup>11</sup> 5:21, which describes *ātman* as *asakta*, is also to be read as denoting the psychological complex (Hara 1999).

situation very different to that of the human person in process.

In the human case the process of attachment has been explained and theorised through an interactive analysis. What could it mean for KA to be attached to the fruits of his cosmic actions? Could KA become attached to the development of the cosmos during a day of *brahman*, desire certain states of affairs within it, and thus consider the cosmic unfoldment in terms of success or failure, that is, in terms of the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of his desire? It is clear from the text, as long as we resist the kind of interpretation of *avatāra* mentioned earlier, that KA is not subject to desires in this way. He emphasises his indifference: 'for me there is nothing to be done, nothing in the three worlds unobtained [but] to be obtained' (3:22abc); 'I am the same with respect to all beings: they are neither odious nor dear to me' (9:29ab). His interaction with the cosmos is of a general nature: he is concerned wholly with the enabling of every occurrence, without any assessment being given of the desirability or likely results of any particular occurrence.<sup>12</sup> In this metaphorical respect he may be said to be characterised by a single *buddhi*. Like *asakta* human actors, the *puruṣottama* is engaged, without remainder, in the moment-by-moment underpinning of the world-process.

However, it is hard to see how KA could become attached. His *deha* is fundamentally different from ours: it is not subject to interaction with a consubstantial environment. Thus, while the generation of attachment within the human *deha* is explained by the text in terms of interaction, through the *indriyas* and *manas*, with the wider world in which the *deha* moves, KA's *deha* is the world, and cannot interact. The psychological complex of human beings is predicated on interaction and the need to be sustained through it, so we cannot understand how the isolated KA could possess *indriyas*, *manas*, *buddhi* or *ahaṃkāra*. In humans the *indriyas*, *manas* and *buddhi* are the basis (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of desire (3:40ab): in KA, desire, intention and attachment have no basis. The idea of *deha* depends on a consubstantial environment, without which the body cannot be delineated: my body is only my body because there is stuff which it is not. In this sense, it is meaningless to speak of the cosmos as God's body. It is also meaningless to speak of KA in terms of *lokasaṃgraha*, *dharma* and *yajña*, since he is not dependent on a particular kind of state of affairs in the way people are. *Dharma*, 'that which sustains', is a creature-centric concept. KA's actions do not have the function of sustaining a *loka* within which alone he can exist, so he has no

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<sup>12</sup> KA does not *want* the Pāṇḍavas to win the war, he just knows they will win.

*lokasaṅgrahadharmā*, and so he is naturally indifferent to cosmic conditions: he is necessarily *asakta* in his activities.

The *puruṣottama*, like *dehin*, is non-attached by default, by definition. It is difficult for us to imagine KA's situation because our experience is of interactive, environmental embodiment. KA is not embodied in the same way as us, and so the *dehin / puruṣottama* analogy breaks down. KA may concentrate on the task being undertaken without considering possible consequences, but he has nothing else to concentrate on, since his actions have no external consequences.

Kṛṣṇa explains (3:27-29; 5:8-9; 18:40-41) that human actions are actually performed by *prakṛti* with its three *guṇas*: the grammatical 'I' does not correspond to the agent of action. A particular action is caused by a particular set of circumstances: responsibility lies outside the individual, who should thus remain detached. Human *asakta karman* is action performed in the knowledge that all actions are performed by *prakṛti*. Each action has its own precise, exhaustive but only partly knowable reasons for happening, hidden within the interaction between the *svabhāva* of the person concerned, and the particular circumstances in which they are to be found at the moment of action. The significance for humans of being determined by *prakṛti*, and the reason why this information can lead to an *asakta* attitude, is that the agency of the action, and thus the negative effect of responsibility, is shifted beyond the person concerned. This shifting can only happen because *prakṛti*, the new explanation of why actions occur, is portrayed as a closed causal system. Human agency is dissolved into a causally sufficient background, a background that was not hypothesised for this purpose, but had emerged already, through empirical observation of the consistent workings of the world. The peculiar nature of KA's non-environmental embodiment continues to plague the equation between his *asakta karman* and ours, for his actions have to take place without any circumstances: there is no natural background to dissolve his actions into. 'Arjuna fights his relatives' has reasons for taking place, but the *puruṣottama / both prakṛtis* conjunction that issues and constitutes a day of *brahman* does not. *Puruṣottama* approaching the *prakṛtis* must be a process, but by definition there is no process until *prakṛti* is in motion, and we have a philosophical Möbius strip.

In the absence of any information explaining KA's creative and supportive proclivities, these must be understood (if this can be said to constitute an understanding) as an absolute fact. To view them as somehow self-chosen both begs the question and threatens KA's ability to be *asakta*. If the *puruṣottama / both prakṛtis* conjunction has a

*svabhāva*, this *svabhāva* is absolute: it is not to be understood, as human *svabhāva* is, in terms of causal antecedents.<sup>13</sup> Kṛṣṇa seems to view his creativity as requiring no further explanation: when he describes the cosmos being re-emitted every *brahman*-morning through his activity, he simply states that this is what he does, without mentioning any motive or explanation, or any possibility of his behaving otherwise (9:7-10). No explanation is given of why he supervises the development of the world in the particular manner he does. While acting without conscious motivation is the cornerstone of the *asaṅga* attitude, at least in the case of humans there are the unconscious motivations of *prakṛti* which, though unknowable in detail, can be assumed to exist, causing our actions. KA's actions lack conscious motivation only insofar as they lack any cause at all.

At 9:8 Kṛṣṇa may be interpreted as explicitly admitting that he is constrained to behave in the way he does. It will be useful here to cite a number of translations of the verse:

'Taking hold of nature which is my own, I send forth again and again all this multitude of beings which are helpless, being under the control of nature' (Radhakrishnan 1948:241).

'Subduing my own material Nature ever again I emanate this whole host of beings, –powerless [themselves], from Nature comes the power' (Zaehner 1969:75).

'Having seized my own lower *prakṛti*, I send forth this whole multitude of helpless beings again and again, at the behest of my lower *prakṛti*' (de Nicolás 1976a:120).

'Resting on my own nature I create, again and again, this entire aggregate of creatures involuntarily by the force of my nature' (van Buitenen 1981:105).

The final *pāda* of the verse is '*avaśaṃ prakṛter vaśāt*'. While the first three of the translators cited take *avaśaṃ* to be an accusative adjective qualifying *bhūtagrāmam imam kṛtsnam* (this entire village of creatures) as helpless (Radhakrishnan and de Nicolás) or powerless (Zaehner), van Buitenen takes it to be an adverb qualifying KA's creative action as involuntary. Further, van Buitenen and de Nicolás understand *prakṛter vaśāt* as qualifying KA's action, not the *bhūtagrāmam* created. All these options are grammatically justifiable, though to understand *prakṛter vaśāt*, but not *avaśaṃ*, as adverbial, as de Nicolás has done, strains the structure of the verse more than van Buitenen's option, which sees the whole last *pāda* as adverbial. It is interesting to note that, while the majority of translators have rendered the verse such that KA's autonomy is not in doubt, van Buitenen's alternative is sensitive to the conclusions we have been suggesting above. Heimann also reads the verse such that 'the God produces

<sup>13</sup> For humans, causal antecedents are said to include *karmic* factors. These may also be applied to the cosmos, left-over *karmabandha* from the previous day of *brahman* sufficing as cause of the present one: see Bronkhorst 2000. There is no suggestion of this idea in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

here *quasi* involuntarily or compulsorily' (1939:129). Elsewhere she calls this 'an unconscious emanation' (1936:99). It is tempting, though speculative, to imagine that *prakṛter vāsāt* alludes to some kind of meta-*prakṛti* which could constitute an external as well as internal environment for KA's actions, a hypothetical explanation of why he does what he does, into which his agency might be dissolved by analogy with the dissolution of human agency. Such a fantasy would allow KA's *asakta karman* meaningfully to resemble human *asakta karman*, and it would also provide a level of explanation at which to understand the otherwise apparent arbitrariness of his character. But of course then we can inquire after the basis of the basis of the basis of the world: either we accept an infinite regress, or the process has to stop somewhere mysterious. At 10:2ab Kṛṣṇa states that neither the multitudes of the celestials nor the great *ṛṣi*s knew his origin, but at 10:3a he describes himself as unborn and beginningless. Here the distinction between the unknown and the non-existent is dissolved, and KA becomes a solipsist.

If, following van Buitenen's reading, KA is *avaśa* in his actions, as are human beings, then there is a meaningful similarity between KA and Arjuna as regards *asakta karman*, as for both of them actions are constrained by what kind of thing the apparent actor happens to be. A radical difference is evident, however, in that while humans, in an attempt to understand the true causes of their behaviour and disable *ahaṃkāra*, can pursue an understanding of their present nature and their actions in terms of a network of causal factors, KA has no such possibility. His predilections are absolute and cannot be explained in terms of anything else. Though his agency seems to be just as illusory as that of a human person, he cannot identify any alternative agent. The sense of *anyavaśa* (controlled by another), which *avaśa* has when applied to humans, cannot be preserved when the word is applied to KA. De Nicolás tries to identify an alternative agent by saying that KA creates 'at the behest of' *prakṛti*, but *prakṛti*, unless it is the fantastical meta-*prakṛti*, is as yet asleep. Since the identification of the alternative agent is a vital aspect of Kṛṣṇa's plan for Arjuna's becoming *asakta*, KA's being *asakta* is both remarkable and mysterious.

By failing to provide a context within which KA's agency could be dissolved and his personality be explained, the text makes it clear that it intends KA to be where the buck stops, but by passing the buck away from the individual person in the first place it has begun a process, of dissolving agency into context, which is hard to stop. Indeed, by saying that 'only *prakṛti* acts', where *prakṛti* is not an entity so much as a way of there



being entities, the text seems to have deconstructed not just human agency, but the very idea of agency, beyond repair. If the only agent is the sum total of all permutations of things, each of which implies and is implied by every other, as if the occurrence of the cosmos was just one event, then 'x performs action y' is just a way of saying 'y occurs' from a perspective which mistakenly privileges x. This being the case, the issue from the human viewpoint is not where, if anywhere, the buck stops, but that the mistakenly privileged x, that is, the person under the influence of *ahamkāra*, is replaced by something more general, something more processual than substantive.<sup>14</sup> KA functions as a recipient of our erstwhile agency, so the very idea of KA is threatened if, by claiming him to be *asakta*, the text leads us to turn the spotlight on *his* agency. The question of how KA relates to the agency we have transferred to him remains unanswered.

The text's silence on this issue may be philosophically strategic but it is hardly satisfying. We cannot tell why KA creates the universe again and again, or why he becomes involved with the maintenance of *dharma*, 'for the rescue of the honest and the destruction of the wicked' (4:8ab). It is easy to anthropomorphise KA, portraying his actions in terms of his preferences. The text itself uses this type of portrayal on occasion, when it talks of Kṛṣṇa responding to his *bhaktas*, but this anthropomorphism is of limited value since, as has been shown, KA has no background against which any preferences can be understood. His nature, including the maintenance of what we call *dharma* and the ability, when rightly perceived, to occasion the salvation of humans, is an absolute fact. We are told that Kṛṣṇa is *asakta* whilst maintaining *dharma*, but his maintenance of *dharma* is so different from ours that we cannot understand human *asakta karman* any better by knowing this about him.

We have now examined many aspects of the human technique of *asakta karman* in the light of the claim that KA is an *asakta karmin*. It has been shown that KA's action is not similar enough to human action to function as a meaningful example for people to follow. Nonetheless, KA's *asakta karman* remains a vital aspect of the text's use of the term, and the similarities and contrasts between the text's applications of *asakta karman*

<sup>14</sup> The problem is linguistic (see above, 5.5): by identifying subjects for verbs, language forces agency onto a word. Nietzsche 1996:29: 'the common people distinguish lightning from the flash of light and take the latter as *doing*, as the effect of a subject which is called lightning... But no such substratum exists; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything. Basically, the common people represent the doing twice over, when they make lightning flash—that is a doing doubled by another doing: it posits the same event once as cause and then once again as effect'.

to human and divine action reveal important limitations of the concept itself. The main thrust of the text's exposition of *asakta karman* is that action can be rendered *asakta* by the knowledge that the action as such is contained and explained by *prakṛti*, which constitutes both the substance and the attendant circumstances of the action. In the human case these circumstances are *svabhāvic*, situational and relational, and in the divine case they are the precise state of play of the *guṇas* at any particular moment. In both cases the existence of activity, the awakening of *prakṛti*, follows from KA's initially non-located *svabhāva*.<sup>15</sup> Attendant upon human possession of this knowledge that all actual actions are accounted for, there is the possibility that action may take place without any psychological fall-out, such that the person discharging it does not claim it as theirs. KA operates in such a manner: he just gets on with the things that he just gets on with, without remarking further, except for the purpose of Arjuna's edification, on the happenstance that it is precisely him who is connected to precisely these actions. The same attitude, we are told, happens on occasion in people too. But it is not clear why it should be necessary, as repeatedly stipulated by Kṛṣṇa, for the *asakta* human actor to know the details of who KA is, and of how he acts through his *puruṣottama* / both *prakṛtis* conjunction. In fact we have found this knowledge to be impossible, since the text fails to give a full picture of KA's action as action. Given the claimed importance of mentally conceiving KA, it is ironic that satisfactory assistance is not given to any reader or hearer of the text except for Arjuna, its first recipient, who had the fillip of witnessing the theophany. This irony would suggest that it is folly to abstract Kṛṣṇa's speech out of its narrative context and use it in the construction of a universal path of salvation. Yet this is certainly what some of the text's editors have done.

Our explorations have led to some unorthodox theological positions: the uniqueness of van Buitenen's interpretation of 9:8 demonstrates the tenacity of the view that KA must be autonomous and free and could not possibly be *avaśa*. Such a view may be conditioned by a theological prejudice as much as by the contents of the text. Whatever theological explorations we have made have been in the context of our study of *asakta karman* in the *Bhagavadgītā*, and should remain in that context: insofar as it is a response to Arjuna's pre-war crisis, the text is far more concerned with the problems of human action than with the problems of theology. The theological problems that the text throws up follow from the application of human ideation, which is necessarily

<sup>15</sup> This is why the cosmos cannot be unique: if KA's absolute *svabhāva* is creative then he must *always*

anthropocentric, to something that is, by its very definition, wholly other (immortal, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient *etc.*). *Asakta karman* does not easily transfer from the human to the divine realm, since the anthropomorphisation of the ultimate cause, whilst perhaps enhancing its psychological accessibility, is philosophically perverse. The analogy between KA and a human being, though initially promising, has broken down.

### 6.3. Avatāra: philosophical objections and socio-historical explanations

The idea of KA sketched above, unconcerned as he brings a cosmos into existence, heedless to what goes on within it, and remorseless as he destroys it again, does not exhaust the *Bhagavadgītā*'s idea of him, however much the text may claim that he is *asakta*. The text expounds a divinity involved with the preservation of *dharma* and the maintenance of felicitous conditions for humanity. KA does not just start *prakṛti* evolving and then leave the process to run its course. He also interferes from time to time to boost *dharma*. It is for this purpose that he is embodied as Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva (4:7-8). The text claims that this involvement does not compromise KA's ability to be *asakta*: just as human beings can be intimately involved with *dharma* and yet be *asakta*, so can KA. How are we to make sense of this, given that KA has no need of *lokasaṃgraha*?

The difficulty of this problem increases the more one anthropomorphises KA. Despite this, the *avatāra* idea has been the cue for imaginative descriptions of him as caring for humanity and as intimately involved with the fortunes of those who have faith in him. Such descriptions may be characterised as religious rather than philosophical: they render the concept of KA more accessible by presenting it in terms which are only really applicable to people. The *Bhagavadgītā* seems to be serving religious and philosophical needs both at once (Olivelle 1964:519), and thus its characterisations of the divine appear contradictory. Thus, for example, Deutsch says that the *avatāra* 'doctrine' 'is simply inconsistent with the rest of the teaching about the nature of the divine and the world which is put forward by the *Gītā*' (1968:18). He deduces an allegorical meaning of the doctrine, such that (p. 20) '*avatāraṇa* is present whenever a man is empirically awakened to the fact of his spiritual status as a human being'. Deutsch is taking liberties with the text here, and it is not altogether clear what he

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create. Here again the extended night of *brahman* is an anomaly.

means, but it is clear that KA's intervention in the universe is in conflict with his being indifferent and beyond the pairs-of-opposites (*dvandvas*: see 4:22, 5:3, 7:27-28 and 15.5) of which *dharma* / *adharmā* is an example.

This conflict can be resolved by appealing to the history of the text, and by crediting Deshpande's assessment that 'there was a version of the *Mahābhārata* which did not contain a notion of Kṛṣṇa as a divinity' (1991:347). We have, in this chapter, found philosophical evidence to support this statement. But why would the idea that Kṛṣṇa is God have been introduced? The impetus for this move appears to have come from socio-political considerations, which outweighed the need for philosophical consistency in the text. Jaiswal, after a detailed survey of textual and inscriptional sources bearing on the origins of the Vaiṣṇava *avatāra* theory, concludes that (1967:132)

'the doctrine of incarnation played a major role in mitigating regional and tribal separatism and extending *brāhmaṇism* to semi-civilised<sup>16</sup> indigenous tribes. The syncretism effected through this doctrine was sometimes *brāhmaṇical* and sometimes popular in character, but to a great extent it was the reconciliatory attitude of Vaiṣṇavism which gave the country a kind of cultural unity and succeeded in establishing the same kind of social structure all over India'.

The implication here is that so-called popular religion centred on the worship of apotheosised human figures or local divinities faithful to their own devotees, and that what we call Vaiṣṇavism is the result of an attempt to unite, by a process of 'hierarchical 'trumping'' (Johnson 1997:95), many such popular religions into a Vedically orthoprax umbrella religion. Jaiswal (p. 74) agrees with Raychaudhuri's (1920:4, 63) view that the appropriation of popular support for a vaguely defined *brāhmaṇism* was effected in order to present a united front against the threat of Buddhism, but this union may equally have been required through internal development, because of population growth and increasing tribal interaction. The same process of absorption and expansion is also discernible in the non-*brāhmaṇical* traditions, with their lists of previous *buddhas* and *tīrthāṅkaras*. The *ad hoc*, locally sensitive nature of this process of expansion is shown by the many textual variants in the number of *avatāras*: four, six, ten, twelve, sixteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four and twenty-nine *avatāras* are mentioned, sometimes different numbers in the same text (Jaiswal pp. 120-121, Bhandarkar 1913:58-59). Kṛṣṇa does not specify in the *Bhagavadgītā* how many *avatāras* there have been prior to himself, nor does he say that he is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. At 10:20-38 he lists his celestial (*divya*) manifestations

<sup>16</sup> This term should be understood in a value-neutral fashion, to indicate cultures unused to socialisation beyond a small number of connubial tribes.

(*vibhūti*s): in this passage he allies himself with many esteemed divine, remembered or mythical powers and personages, which may have been representative of different communities within a wider polity now being established by means of overarching ideological structures (Gonda 1969:126). These *vibhūti*s can be explained in the same terms as the *avatāras*: they demand a non-philosophical explanation, in any case, because Kṛṣṇa has already made it clear that he is the substance and spirit of everything and everybody, so to list popular items would be no more representative than to list unpopular ones.

The text's emphasis on loyalty to Kṛṣṇa as Lord can be read in the context of the rituals and ideologies of early Indian social formations. Social structure, particularly in rural areas, may well have been based around the pre-eminence and economic power of local Lords. R. S. Sharma (1991:16) describes the decline in urbanism after about 300 CE:

'If it became difficult to collect taxes, to bring these to towns and then to disburse salaries to officials and soldiers and to give gifts to the *brāhmaṇas* in terms of money or cattle, the state felt obliged to have recourse to land grants which became common from the third-fourth century AD onwards. In the new situation the understanding seems to have been that the state gave a village to a select person: that person fended for himself, collected taxes, maintained law and order in the village and took care of it'

The idea that KA is the recipient of all *bhakti*, which people direct towards manifold personages (9:23-24, 10:37ab), allows the religion of Kṛṣṇa-*bhakti* to function as a backdrop against which socio-hierarchical ideologies might be sustained in local religious and ritual contexts.<sup>17</sup> The plurality of God's taking form to protect *dharma* would be an idea particularly likely to promote social stability in a historical period where local Lords or *rājans*, in exchange for *bhakti* of whatever kind, ensured the protection of the *bhaktas* and the maintenance of their *loka*.<sup>18</sup> Kṛṣṇa's deification within the text can be explained historically: once the social effects of text are appreciated by

<sup>17</sup> Ali 2001 mentioned the terminological similarities between the discourse of *bhakti* in the *Bhagavadgītā* and the discourses of dominance and power within Indian courtly and erotic contexts. Politically, a person was doing well if they were *asakta* and *svatantra* (self-reliant), if they had *bhaktas*, that is, folk under their *vaśa*, folk *sakta* with respect to them. This need not impact on what we have said concerning the philosophy of *asakta karman* in the text. Its idea of being *asakta* in action is logically separate from the idea of being *sakta* with respect to *mokṣa*, Kṛṣṇa, or any other deity or person. Though these two ideas seem to be conflated by the text at various points (e.g. 7:1: Deutsch 1968:163 and Minor 1980, 1982 make much of this, the latter even equating *yukta* and *sakta* which, generally speaking, are opposites in the text), the object of the (lack of) attachment in the first idea is action with its hypothetical *phala*, but in the second it is not. Nonetheless, the interaction of religious and political discourses is remarkable.

<sup>18</sup> Scharfe 1992 emphasises that *rājan* originally indicated a function taken on temporarily, which was invested with a high degree of sacred mystique and the responsibility for violent action when necessary to protect the interests of those to whom the *rājan* was contractually bound through receipt of *bhakti*, taxation or gifts. See also Gonda 1966.

the elite in a world with wide cultural interaction, hierarchies (*varṇa etc.*) within that wider culture may be textually strengthened or inculcated whilst local, more visible power structures remain in place, their figureheads accepted as subordinate deities, *vibhūtis* or *avatāras* within the textual soteriological scheme, which is stabilised as a result.

In light of these historical developments, we can see the *Bhagavadgītā's* *avatāra* theory as separate from its philosophy of action and its cosmogonic theology. However, much as we might intellectually separate editorial concerns, they appear combined in the text itself, and hence we may attempt to derive a consistent view from the text. Does the *avatāra* theory as presented by the *Bhagavadgītā* render its theology unintelligible, or is it possible that, despite the apparent extraneousness of the theory, its introduction might be interpreted as having supplemented, rather than having contradicted, the view given elsewhere in the text?

This would be possible by viewing KA's interventions as a fact of his nature, to which he conforms but which he neither chooses nor is attached to, and by leaving unasked the question of why he should have this nature. We have to have an absolute nature for KA even without his interventions: we have already seen that there can be a world at all only because he cannot help setting *prakṛti* in motion. If he has a special relationship with *dharma*, which is an anthropocentric subset of *ṛta*, the wider cosmic order, it is of course easy to think of him from a human viewpoint in terms of compassion and grace, but a less misleading representation of the situation would be as follows. Human beings are arbitrarily privileged, both because they particularly benefit from KA's re-establishment of *dharma*, and because they are the type of agglomeration of *prakṛti* most associated with *dehin*, and hence represent his lower *and* higher *prakṛtis*. Those people who know KA, who have their minds fixed on him, who act without attachment and who, when they die, go to him, not to rebirth, are especially, but no less arbitrarily, privileged. An attitude of gratitude from such people is to some extent easy to understand, but rests on the presumption that things could have been otherwise: rather, Kṛṣṇa's account of Arjuna's action, that it is certain to happen (11:32-34, 18:59-60), should apply to KA's actions too. It is less misleading to describe KA's attitude towards humankind in terms of agent-less passive verbs describing people, than it is to do so in terms of active verbs with a divine grammatical subject. To talk of KA's love for his *bhaktas* is an anthropomorphisation which may reasonably be sustained only if we do not anthropomorphise according to the mistaken anthropology which sees

a human being as able to act differently from how he or she does act.

The removal of KA's freedom has the consequence of allowing the behaviour of the *avatāras* to be notched into the causal scheme of *prakṛti*'s activity. If, even after *prakṛti* has begun to evolve in manifest form under the influence of the *puruṣottama*, KA may decide, on the basis of his ongoing assessment of that evolution, to take on a form and influence proceedings in one direction or another, then this poses a threat to the very idea of *prakṛti* as a sufficient cause. The text has strongly implied, in its deconstruction of agency, that all occurring activity is accounted for within the sphere of occurrence, and that each *brahman*-day of activity is internally physically coherent. If the *avatāra* initiates an event that is in any sense not caused by *prakṛti*, the causal pathways leading forward in time from this event will spread in many directions, encompassing an ever increasing set of events that cannot fully be explained as *prakṛtic*. This set of events can be visualised (on a crude space / time graph) as an elongating, broadening cone whose tip is the *avatāric* event. If the idea of *avatāra* is applied to a whole life (4:6-9 identifies the very coming-to-be (*janman*) of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva as a *dharmic* intervention), then every activity performed by the *avatāra* would constitute the tip of such an event-cone. The idea that *avatāra* is a free divine response to a specific set of unfolding circumstances presumably lies behind Lipner's conjecture (1986:103, see also p. 122) that 'the *avatāric* bodies, as phenomenalizations of the supernal form, are non-*prakṛtic* in nature'. However, this would mean that many non-*avatāric* bodies and events, since they occur within an effects-cone of a previous *avatāra*, are significantly non-*prakṛtic* in nature. This undoes the force of the claim that only *prakṛti* acts.

If, following this line of reasoning, we conclude that even *avatāric* events are *prakṛtic*, we may ask what distinguishes *avatāric* events from non-*avatāric* ones. As detailed earlier, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is particularly well placed to have discerned the *dharmic* threat that people such as Duryodhana pose. Since there are identifiable reasons for Kṛṣṇa to behave in the way he does, that is, identifiable reasons for the re-establishment of *dharma* which he effects, what does it mean to call this behaviour *avatāric*? No more or less than that it succeeds in re-establishing *dharma*. This is, after all, the touchstone of *avatāra* as expounded at 4:7-8. This would mean that any re-establishment of *dharma* would indicate *avatāra*, which brings us close to the sense of Deutsch's interpretation, quoted earlier: the person who Deutsch characterises as being 'empirically awakened to the fact of his spiritual status as a human being' is,

presumably, the knower of the distinction between *deha* and *dehin*, the *asakta* actor, whose *buddhi* represents activities to itself only in terms of *lokasaṃgraha*, that is, in terms of the maintenance of *dharma*. A person achieving this would be doing so as a result of causal *prakṛtic* antecedents, and might, by the same token, be caused subsequently to stop doing so.

After the war, Arjuna asks Kṛṣṇa for a recapitulation of the substance of the *Bhagavadgītā*, saying that he has forgotten what was said just before the battle commenced. This shows that Arjuna does not succeed once and for all in becoming an *asakta karmin*. As we have seen earlier, the Epic will not tell us definitively that Arjuna fought the war under the influence of Kṛṣṇa's speech, focused solely upon *lokasaṃgraha* and upon KA as the source of all activity. Nonetheless, if he did, his *dharma*-sustaining war efforts may speculatively be seen, according to the understanding we have reached, as a temporary instance of *avatāra*. Kṛṣṇa suggests, on this post-war occasion, that he himself is not able fully to access the *dharma*-sustaining potency he displayed before the battle. He is not joined-with-*yoga* as he was then (*Mahābhārata* 14.16:12): the situation has been successfully resolved, the main threat to *dharma* dealt with. Thus, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva's being an *avatāra* can also be thought of as temporary and situation-specific.

Through a metaphorical understanding of the more anthropomorphic descriptions of KA's interaction with the manifest world, we have reached a position whereby the sustaining power indicated by the idea of *avatāra* is contained within the evolution of *prakṛti*. More specifically, it is contained within the subsection of manifest *prakṛti* which involves human persons, that is, the subsection enlivened by *dehin*, which therefore has the potential to reflect, in *buddhi* and *manas*, the definitive non-attachment of *dehin*, KA's higher *prakṛti*. It is through this close connection to KA that human beings have the ability to maintain the *dharmas*, which sustain them. The brute world can continue to be manifest only insofar as it is connected, by logical necessity, to the founding impulse of the *puruṣottama*. Likewise the human world, the *loka* of *lokasaṃgraha*, can be sustained only insofar as it is intimately connected, through *dehin*, to that same *puruṣottama*. The intimacy of the connection between *dehin* and *puruṣottama* is illustrated by the analogy explored earlier: both the human being and the cosmos can only be manifest at all by being under the influence of something wholly other than, and permanently detached from, the dissectable stuff of their manifestation.



We have pursued many philosophical avenues in our attempt to understand the *Bhagavadgītā*'s claim that Kṛṣṇa is the paradigmatic non-attached actor. In conclusion, we may summarise our findings as follows. Kṛṣṇa's political activities are compatible with the claim: he, more than all the other major characters in the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*, warrants being described as one whose *buddhi* is *asakta* and singly focused on *lokasaṃgraha*. When KA's activities are in question, however, it seems that human non-attachment can only be illustrated by comparison with non-human non-attachment if the non-human entity in question has, at the very least, the possibility of being attached. It is hard to see how KA could ever be attached, and hence the knowledge of how he is non-attached is not relevant to us. *Dehin* and the *puruṣottama* are definitively non-attached, and *dehin*'s non-attachment may on occasion be reflected by *buddhi* and *manas*, the higher *prakṛti* of the person: this results in human *asakta karman*. *Puruṣottama*'s non-attachment, however, is always reflected by *dehin*, the higher *prakṛti* of the divine person, and hence *asakta karman* is the only kind of divine *karman* there is. Our hope was that, by exploring the claim that Kṛṣṇa is non-attached, we could gain insights into how people (or, at the very least, *other* people) might emulate him in this regard. However, having explored the claim, no progress has been made into understanding *asakta karman* as a human methodology, despite the suggestion we have been led to make, that the circumstances of *asakta karman* as a human eventuality are most obviously those in which *dharma* is critically threatened. The claim that KA is non-attached has, instead, served to illustrate the non-attachment of *dehin*. This is unhelpful as far as *asakta karman* is concerned because *dehin* cannot act.

7.1. *Asakta karman* in the *Bhagavadgītā* from a narrative point of view

It would be of great assistance in our understanding of *asakta karman* if it was clear from the narrative whether or not Arjuna fought the battle *asakta*, or whether or not Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva was *asakta* in his Epic activities as he claims to be. However, this is not the case. From a narrative point of view, no character is shown to be *asakta*, it is just that some characters claim to be so, or are claimed by other characters to be so, or are entreated by other characters to become so. For this reason, the philosophical possibility of deliberately *asakta karman* must be seen as a narrative fiction. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, it is one of the subjects Kṛṣṇa expounds while Arjuna is changing his mind and deciding to fight, but it may be that Arjuna's changing his mind occurred for other reasons. Even if we reduce the narrative significance of *asakta karman* to that of a rhetorical device used by Kṛṣṇa, we still cannot say whether that use was a successful one or not.

If when Arjuna, at leisure some time after the war, asked Kṛṣṇa to repeat the words he had uttered on that occasion on the as yet unbloodied battlefield, Arjuna was asking because he was particularly interested in a dimly remembered idea of *asakta karman*, and if Kṛṣṇa, after admitting that he could not remember his own words, had, instead of improvising others, called for Saṁjaya, who heard it all the first time, and left Arjuna to quiz him for some time,<sup>1</sup> the impression that Arjuna would then have had of *asakta karman* might have resembled the following.

Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna: you are Arjuna the *kṣatriya* so you must fight, and you will triumph. But is the *Bhagavadgītā*'s solution to Arjuna's crisis-of-decision of use to anyone else? Johnson 1997:103: 'to employ the *Gītā*'s soteriological method –the giving up of the fruits of our actions to God– without... a pre-established 'worldly' moral framework, would present all kinds of practical and ethical problems'. Hence, as shown in section three of chapter four, the need for Dharmaśāstras: but these only tell you what to expect from 'yourself' as described under various stereotyped categories. The moral code of Dharmaśāstra is like a statistical law, which works as an approximate, probabilistic tool, but which is of scant assistance when an individual quantum person, Arjuna, has good reason to fear that he is a statistical anomaly, a

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<sup>1</sup> Say, for example, four and a half years, bearing in mind that Arjuna would also have sundry royal duties to perform.

person forced by his *svabhāva* to do what his upbringing and the Dharmaśāstras have led him to expect he never would. His fighting is due to Kṛṣṇa Almighty showing him that it is unavoidable, that he *is* such an anomaly, that he must therefore revise his expectations of himself, and that his army will be victorious. But the text will not be of any comparable use to anyone else: widening one's expectations to include the unexpected is different from being told precisely what to expect.

The text shows that, even though we may not know what to do, our selfconscious reasonings and motivations are of far less value than we ordinarily suppose. We may be asked to account for our actions in social contexts, but in the cosmic context the existence of alternatives is illusory and everything that happens, past, present and future, is interconnected and self-accounting. With this in mind, it may be immaterial to conceive of one's future, particularly since, as I have shown in chapter six, situations of extreme danger, in which one's natural ecology is threatened, call forth an instinctual response which will ensure that one's resources are maximally focused to one's benefit. The knowledge that this is the case can be expected to reduce anxiety. However, such knowledge is continually threatened by social structures and ideologies, which present a contrasting, and spurious, account of the world. We can confidently say, though Arjuna was not to know this, that social ideology was forced to play this role in order to achieve the practical task of maintaining peace amongst different ethnic groups which, for millions of years and until comparatively recently, had been culturally isolated and devoid of common interests. In this situation it is imperative, for the mental prosperity of the individual, that the ideological appurtenances of society be counteracted by the maintenance of a cosmic perspective which can undo the existential damage due to individualism, social manipulation through desires, and the linguistic and symbolic order. It is this cosmic perspective that is alluded to by the text's use of the term *asakta karman*, but, in cases where the action in question is socially predicated, it is necessary also to maintain some measure of societal perspective, and so *asakta* must be understood to apply in a relative rather than an absolute sense. This is perhaps another way of saying that, in social situations, one's instincts, and the education one would have received in an isolated *kula*, do not on their own provide a good enough guide to behaviour.<sup>2</sup> The rules of the social game must be known and respected, but that game itself should not be taken too seriously. It must nonetheless be played, because society is now an integral part of the *loka* which humans inhabit: however, the recent arrival of

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<sup>2</sup> For socialised adults this in itself may seem instinctual, but it is in fact learned, as the memory of childhood embarrassments will testify.

this social game, the fact that humans have not evolved to be able to play it, that is to say it is not natural for humans, means that it is not realistic so suggest, as Teschner does (see above, 4.1), that societal action can be non-intentional. Even if the excesses of desire are kept in check, societal activity is inescapably teleological. Social ideology reserves its highest respect for those who do keep desires in check and thus appear to be acting out of duty alone, but duty, in its social rather than cosmic sense, is a new and strange ideological term: it refers to activities, not mentalities, even if mentalities may (socially) perceive themselves in terms of it.

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, as we have shown, *jñāna* denotes the cosmic, non-societal perspective, and *buddhi* contains the potential to maintain it. As Brassard says, speaking of the function of *buddhi* in the *Bhagavadgītā* (1999:96), ‘one should maintain a certain vision of this world and... by just maintaining it, a spiritual transformation is to occur... the integration of a salvific meaning or vision of this world and maintaining an awareness of it is the only thing required for true spiritual progression’. The maintaining of this awareness is *yoga*. I would add, on the basis of the arguments in chapter three above, that the context of this spiritual quest is not, as suggested by Hindu, Buddhist and Jain soteriology, entrapment within *samsāra*, but rather it is the existential situation of living in a society consisting overwhelmingly of people one is not related to.

Regardless of the terms in which the ‘spiritual quest’ may be presented, an individual’s hearing about the possibility of such a quest, positioning him or herself upon it, and succeeding or failing in it, are events which, like all events, must be determined.<sup>3</sup> This is borne out by chapter five above, which has dealt in depth with determinism as an instinctive, prudent and effective approach to the world, validated by human scientific and technological activity for at least a million years. The implications of determinism can only be eluded by ideological fudging or, in physics, as shown above, 2.6, by recourse to hypothetical indeterminism: they are antithetical to the social ideology of individual agency, hence ‘the *theoretical* effects of ideology... are... a threat or a hindrance to scientific knowledge’ (Althusser 1969:12). In terms of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the ‘philosophy’ that emerges from social ideology is a threat to the natural philosophy that had already emerged from experiential reflection.

Non-attachment in action is a human possibility, but it is very rare.<sup>4</sup> An absolute

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<sup>3</sup> Hence *yoga* can be conceived non-teleologically, as a common prelude to *buddhi*-maintenance, rather than as something undertaken in order to maintain *buddhi*.

<sup>4</sup> Kṛṣṇa’s claim at 7:3 that *asakta karmīns* are rare is apparently contradicted by 4:10 which says that

sense of *asakta* is conceivable only by imagining a situation without societal context. This is possible in the case of the asceticism which the text derides, but then the *karman* is missing from *asakta karman*. To be absolutely *asakta*, *karman* has to be secret, unwitting (although fashioned by wit) and unjudged. This is the case with many actions: blinking and sundry bodily activities; aspects of one's personal routine; some activities performed at leisure on one's own;<sup>5</sup> and actions performed in situations of such emergency that societal *dharma*s are forced to take a back seat, as in Arjuna's and Kṛṣṇa's case with the *Mahābhārata* war. Many martial and other heroic situation-saving activities, as well as some criminal ones, are of this last type, which is preserved in a simulated form by sport.<sup>6</sup> In light of Arjuna's statement of his fears, we may infer that *asakta karman* was more prevalent before the situations which gave rise to society and the mixing of culturally isolated groups,<sup>7</sup> when *dharma*, social order, was not yet differentiated from *ṛta*, cosmic order, culturally different folk were an abomination by definition, and behavioural anxiety the like of Arjuna's was unknown.<sup>8</sup>

A quantum object cannot be interrogated without changing it in the process (see above, 2.6): although it *did* have both position and momentum immediately before the operation of measurement of one or other of them, that measurement causes an awkward obscuring such that now they cannot both be known. In a similar way the mentality accompanying the habitual, instinctual or otherwise unreflected activities of a human quanta is awkwardly obscured in the process of one's recognition of those activities in oneself, which corresponds to the performance of a measurement. This awkwardness occurs because the context of this selfconsciousness is societal, and thus the recognition of one's own behaviours, irrupting as it does upon a kind of forgetting, an apparent allowing of the body to do as it will, is accompanied by existential anxiety

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there have been many. This contradiction was ameliorated above, 5.5, by understanding *asakta* in a relative sense with regard to the many. If *asakta* is to be understood in an absolute sense, then the contradiction can be explained socially, by the need to encourage would-be *asakta karmins*, or philosophically, by remembering that there have been countless previous creations.

<sup>5</sup> This kind of non-attachment is threatened by the possibility of celebrity, the idea that one's private activities might be made public by future biographers. A judgemental omniscient God epitomises this threat, which is all the more dangerous when the God in question is claimed to have a metasocial agenda.

<sup>6</sup> The problem with sport is that it institutionalises judgement both of activities and of the hypothesised attitude behind them. Such judgements are, however, contextualised by the knowledge that 'it's only a game'.

<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, the old world of ancient *ksatriya* values that the *Mahābhārata* laments the necessary passing of, is in fact the world of the pre-societal kin-group.

<sup>8</sup> On this view, anxiety over the approval of parents and other relatives, as well as actual disapproval towards relatives, must be understood as an application of strategies predicated on wider social interaction into situations where they do not naturally apply.

pivoting around the need, at some level of possibility, to account for one's behaviours in terms of a responsible and normative intentionality which does not fit.

### 7.2. *Asakta karman* in the *Bhagavadgītā* from a historical point of view

Arjuna's crisis-of-decision arose, in the narrative, because dependence on *kula* tradition was tripped up by cultural change, and incompatible options were simultaneously commended. I have shown that the *Mahābhārata*'s creation was in the context of such cultural change, and that its social purpose has seriously warped its philosophy. Initially, this seems to have been a deterministic philosophy intended to allay the anxiety of warriors concerning the personal results of their martial exploits, and thus to ensure that they fight to the best of their abilities. The idea here is that whether or not one prevails in combat is beyond one's control, so it is premature and irrelevant to imagine one's glorious victory or miserable defeat: one must gird one's loins and do one's best, focused on the task with single *buddhi*, come what may. This idea of *asakta karman* may have included an analysis of *prakṛti* and of the human psychophysical organism to back up its determinism. It may also have included Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva as the paradigm of such an attitude.

Later, the text has been presented to a much wider audience, in which context an extant idea of rebirth according to merit, which assisted the smooth running of a cosmopolitan society by explaining inequalities, but which was in danger of being disarmed by emphasis on *mokṣa* and the corresponding renunciation of social duties, has been adjusted in order to encourage individualistic spiritual pursuit compatible with social order and hierarchical structures, notably the pre-eminence of *brāhmaṇas*. I have shown that the idea of rebirth according to merit, the notion of *mokṣa* from *samsāra*, the *Bhagavadgītā*'s reinterpretation of *karmabandha*, and its theology, are all philosophically spurious. Nonetheless, these ideas have appropriated *asakta karman* with some felicity. The introduction of rebirth and the biographisation of *dehin* serve to trivialise the events of the present life, making failure in any particularly worldly endeavour far less of a worry. It is quite possible that the *Bhagavadgītā* existed in an interim format, the *deha* / *dehin* distinction supplementing the idea of *asakta karman* without yet any mention of *mokṣa*. However, since the social ideology of rebirth and *karmabandha* depends on the freedom of the will to direct behaviour in a manner that will have post-mortem benefits, such an interim text would have needed to downplay

determinism. The idea of *mokṣa* does not fit into the text unless *karmabandha* is reinterpreted as dependent on attitude rather than brute deeds, for then Arjuna, to pursue it, would have had good grounds for not fighting. Once *karmabandha* is reinterpreted, though, *mokṣa* can be an additional benefit of *asakta karman*: further, that reinterpretation threatens the ability of those seeking *mokṣa* to do so by renunciative means. Again, there may have been an interim text at this stage of development. When *avatāra* theology was developed as a means of suppressing religious barriers to social integration, Kṛṣṇa became an *avatāra*, buttressing the authority of the text as well as allowing it to provide additional support for the *status quo* through the mechanism of transferable *bhakti*. The anthropomorphisation of the Absolute which such theology entailed meant that the Almighty's creative motivations were an issue: this issue was solved by the claim that the Almighty practises *asakta karman*, which then also serves as an encouragement to folk eager for its benefits but unsure of precisely what it is. At some stage of development human *asakta karman* was also associated with the idea of *yajña*: while this association strengthened the position of *brāhmaṇas* as overseers of cosmos-sustaining ritual, it is philosophically illegitimate as it conflates an internally defined *asakta karman* with an external description of how *yajña* actions are cosmically efficacious (see above, 4.1).

I suggest that religious texts, which survive for so long simply because they are overdetermined by their social purpose, present particularly fine examples of this expanding evolutionary process and the philosophical beggary that it entails. All texts are overdetermined by purpose, but those that bear traces of many stages of expansion and re-creation show this purpose-drivenness most clearly.

### 7.3. Implications for the study of religions

The discipline of the study of religions centres on the interaction between culturally embedded but nonetheless to some extent adoptable 'philosophies of life' (the seeker or believer's perspective), and the analysis of text as a historical social object. My argumentations have shown that, in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā*, the second clause, if taken seriously, gives the lie to the first: the historical exigencies that have formed the text have served to corrupt philosophy in the interests of social ideology. The only way for scholar-seekers to pursue a philosophy of life as well as an accurate understanding of text is to revise their expectations of what kind of philosophy is being sought: the

materialistic, empirical and scientific business of historical research will only easily interact with a philosophy of life that tends towards the materialistic, empirical and scientific. This is an important realisation for the study of religions to make. From this perspective, a (probably political) sympathy for religious claims that certain texts are of transcendental origin is the only factor that could allow the study of religions to have any ground not overlapping socio-political history, textology or natural philosophy.<sup>9</sup> In terms of the first and second of these, it will be of great benefit to the study of religions to acknowledge that in an important sense 'religion' has occurred only very recently in human history, in the wake of a crisis which was reached when natural xenophobia, independently culturally embedded in many isolated kin-groups, had to be counteracted by ideological and textual means to facilitate dense, mixed populations. Because this happened more or less independently in different parts of the globe, there are now frictions between several ideological formations all evolved in response to similar problems. So much religious behaviour demonstrates the continuing absence of the spiritual fellowship that much religious discourse yearns for. It may be that the idea of such fellowship is not just an ideological construct but is also a memory of the experience of almost every non-recent generation of our ancestors. To take this suggestion seriously we must imagine what life in a small, isolated kin-group would be like. The study of 'ideology' or 'religion' must now recognise such imagination as its origin.

#### 7.4. Conclusions concerning the history of the idea of the 'subject'

The idea of the 'subject' functions as an analytic structural apparatus for the purposes of signification and differentiation of dynamic entities from similarly structured but internally inaccessible others. Given the history of the human species, the integrity of the kin-group should be seen as the initial, foundational location of the subjectifying apparatus. The idioms of sociobiological writing imply a re-subjectification of the gene pool. But the individual human body is the obvious location of consciousness-as-such,<sup>10</sup> and there must have been mechanisms of individual human differentiation immemorially even in genetically closed communities, so, catalysed by tribal interaction, the analytic of the subject was applied in ancient India to the individual

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<sup>9</sup> This last would include 'transcendental' religious experiences.

<sup>10</sup> Many non-materialistic philosophies say that the body is the location but not the ground of consciousness-as-such.



human being, transforming it into a person,<sup>11</sup> and also to the genetically diverse community, transforming it into a state, as in the *Ārthasāstra*.<sup>12</sup>

What has been referred to above, 6.2-3, as the anthropomorphisation of Kṛṣṇa Almighty, is just the application of subjecthood to the cosmos, an application which, in the light of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s deconstruction of agency, is perhaps not much more absurd than its application to the individual human being, but which, since the Almighty is held to be the only entity of its kind, lacks a fundamental ground for subjectification which exists in the cases of the state and the person. For this reason alone it is legitimate to view the subjectification of the Almighty as a derivative of other subjectifications.

Also derivative of other subjectifications, most obviously that of the individual human being, is the subjectification of a hypothetical and abstract entity known as *dehin*, *ātman* or soul. I have argued above (3.1, 6.2) that the hypothesis of such an entity is philosophically useful in epistemological contexts, but that its subjectification is a philosophically unsupportable ideological move, all the more absurd because that which is here subjectified is no more nor less than the reification of the potential to be a subject.

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<sup>11</sup> Hence 'I' is a person, a man or a woman, rich or poor, but 'I am that I am' (Exodus 3:14).

<sup>12</sup> The ideological uses of this type of subjectification are manifold: it is applied to communal entities far more vague than even a state, such as 'men', 'the British public', 'the voting public', 'the intelligentsia'. In such applications it is often used to make claims that could not be substantiated even were they to be understood, claims which may (and may be intended to) affect the ways in which individual human beings represent themselves as subjects.

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Appendix 1: Text and translation of *Bhagavadgītā* passages referred to

Each numbered verse consists of four *pādas*: *pādas* a and b are separated by a colon, b and c by a line break, and c and d by a colon. Introductory syllables occur occasionally in the text to denote a change of speaker: these have been missed out in the scheme below, where a change of speaker has, when necessary, been noted by '[A:]' and '[K:]'. Vocatives (naming or describing the person addressed) have largely been omitted from the translations, and names have been paraphrased: though these may be significant from some points of view (Eder 1988:24-26), they are not relevant to this thesis and would tend to confuse the reader. The phrasing used in the translations is often rather clumsy: this is the price paid for accuracy. For the purposes of this thesis, strict adherence to the Sanskrit text is more important than English style, which in any case is a matter of convention.

- 1:26 *tatrāpaśyat sthitān pārthaḥ : pitṛn atha pitāmahān*  
*ācāryān mātulān bhrātṛn : putrān pautrān sakhīms tathā*  
[Arjuna] saw, standing there, fathers, grandfathers, teachers, maternal uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons and friends too...
- 1:27 *śvaśurān suhrdaś caiva : senayor ubhayor api*  
*tān samīksya sa kaunteyah : sarvān bandhūn avasthitān*  
...fathers-in-law and good-hearted ones in both armies. On seeing all these relations standing, [Arjuna],...
- 1:28 *kṛpayā parayāviṣṭo : viṣṭdann idam abravīt*  
*drṣṭvemam svajanam kṛṣṇa : yuyutsuṃ samupasthitam*  
...overcome by the utmost pity, dejected, said this: Having seen my own people come near eager for battle,...
- 1:29 *sīdanti mama gātrāni : mukhyaṃ ca pariśuśyati*  
*vepathuś ca śarīre me : romaharṣaś ca jāyate*  
...my limbs become faint and my mouth dries up. Trembling and hair-bristling begin in my body.
- 1:30 *gāṇḍīvaṃ sraṃsate hastāt : tvak caiva paridahyate*  
*na ca śaknomy avasthātum : bhramatīva ca me manaḥ*  
Gāṇḍīva (Arjuna's bow) falls from hand, and skin seems to be burning. I am not able to stand, and my mind seems to reel.
- 1:31 *nimittāni ca paśyāmi : viparītāni keśava*  
*na ca śreyo 'nupaśyāmi : hatvā svajanam āhave*  
And I see unfavourable omens: I do not see good in killing [one's] own people in war.
- 1:32 *na kāṅkṣe vijayaṃ kṛṣṇa : na ca rājyaṃ sukhāni ca*  
*kiṃ no rājyena govinda : kiṃ bhogair jīvitena vā*  
I do not desire victory nor kingship nor pleasures: what[']s the use of] our kingship? What[']s the use of] delights or life?
- 1:33 *yeṣāṃ arthe kāṅkṣitaṃ no : rājyaṃ bhogaḥ sukhāni ca*  
*ta ime 'vasthitā yuddhe : prāṇāṃs tyaktvā dhanāni ca*  
Those for whose sake we desire kingship, delights and pleasures, are these ones

stood in battle, renouncing life and wealth:...

- 1:34 *ācāryāḥ pitarāḥ putrās : tathaiva ca pitāmahāḥ  
mātulāḥ śvasurāḥ pautrāḥ : śyālāḥ sambandhinas tathā*  
...teachers, fathers and sons as well as grandfathers, maternal uncles, fathers-in-law, grandchildren, brothers-in-law and relatives.
- 1:35 *etān na hantum icchāmi : ghnato 'pi madhusūdana  
api trailokyarājyasya : hetoḥ kiṃ nu mahīkrte*  
I do not want to kill these, even though [they are] murderous, even by reason of the kingship of the triple world: why then for the sake of the earth?
- 1:36 *nihatya dhārtarāṣṭrān naḥ : kāprītiḥ syāj janārdana  
pāpam evāśrayed asmān : hatvaitān ātatāyinaḥ*  
Having killed the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, what joy may be ours? Having killed these drawn-bowed ones, *pāpa* indeed would rest on us.
- 1:37 *tasmān nārhā vyaṃ hantum : dhārtarāṣṭrān svabāndhavān  
svajānaṃ hi kathaṃ hatvā : sukhinaḥ syāma mādhava*  
Therefore we are not entitled to kill the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, our relations. For how would we be happy having killed our own people?
- 1:38 *yady apy ete na paśyanti : lobhopahatacetasāḥ  
kulakṣayakṛtaṃ doṣaṃ : mitradrohe ca pātakam*  
Even if these, from minds afflicted by greed, do not see the *doṣa* caused by tribal decay, and the downfall in treachery to friends,...
- 1:39 *kathaṃ na jñeyam asmābhiḥ : pāpād asmān nivartitum  
kulakṣayakṛtaṃ doṣaṃ : prapaśyadbhir janārdana*  
...how could we, discerning the *doṣa* caused by tribal decay, not know to turn away from this *pāpa*?
- 1:40 *kulakṣaye praṇaśyanti : kuladharmāḥ sanātanāḥ  
dharme naṣṭe kulaṃ kṛtsnam : adharmo 'bhibhavaty uta*  
In tribal decay the eternal tribal *dharmas* disappear, and, *dharma* being lost, *adharmas* approaches the whole tribe.
- 1:41 *adharmābhibhavāt kṛṣṇa : pradusyanti kulastriyaḥ  
strīṣu duṣṭāsu vārṣṇeya : jāyate varṇasaṃkaraḥ*  
From the approach of *adharmas*, the tribal women are corrupted. The women being corrupted, the mixing of *varṇas* arises.
- 1:42 *saṃkaro narakāyaiva : kulaghnānāṃ kulasya ca  
patanti pitaro hy eṣāṃ : luptapiṇḍodakakriyāḥ*  
Mixing is conducive to hell for the tribe-killers and for the tribe, for their ancestors, offerings of riceball and water removed, fall.
- 1:43 *doṣair etaiḥ kulaghnānāṃ : varṇasaṃkarakārakaiḥ  
utsādyante jātidharmāḥ : kuladharmās ca śāśvatāḥ*  
The birth- (*i.e.* caste-) *dharmas* and the eternal tribal *dharmas* are destroyed by these *doṣas* of the tribe-killers which cause the mixing of *varṇas*.

- 1:44 *utsannakuladharmāṇām : manuṣyāṇām janārdana  
narake niyataṃ vāso : bhavatīty anuśuśruma*  
There is certainly a home in hell for folk whose tribal *dharmas* are destroyed:  
thus we have repeatedly heard.
- 1:45 *aho bata mahatpāpaṃ : kartuṃ vyavasitā vayam  
yad rājyasukhalobhena : hantuṃ svajanam udyatāḥ*  
Alas! Alack! We are resolved to do a great *pāpa* if [we are] prepared to kill  
[our] own people out of greed for kingship and pleasures.
- 1:46 *yadi mām apratīkāram : aśastram śastrapāṇayaḥ  
dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanyus : tan me kṣematarāṃ bhavet*  
If the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, swords in hands, were to kill me in battle defenceless  
and swordless, that would be greater happiness for me.
- 1:47 *etam uktvārjunaḥ saṃkhye : rathopastha upāviśat  
visṛjya saśaram cāpaṃ : śokasaṃvignamānasah*  
Having spoken thus in the battle, Arjuna, mind distracted by sorrow, threw  
down bow and arrows and sat down on the seat of the chariot.
- 2:1 *taṃ tathā kṛpayāviṣtam : aśrupūrnākulekṣanam  
viśīdantam idaṃ vākyam : uvāca madhusūdanaḥ*  
Then [Kṛṣṇa] said this speech to the one filled with pity, dejected, eyes  
confused and filled with tears:
- 2:2 *kutas tvā kaśmalam idaṃ : viṣame samupasthitam  
anāryajūṣtam asvargyam : akīrtikaram arjuna*  
Why has this consternation, not liked by the noble, not leading to heaven, not  
conducive to fame, befallen you at an inconvenient [time and place]?
- 2:3 *klaibyaṃ mā sma gamaḥ pārtha : naitat tvayy upapadyate  
kṣudram hṛdayadaurbalyaṃ : tyaktvottiṣṭha paramtapa*  
Do not indulge unmanliness: this does not become you. Renounce low  
weakness of heart and stand up!
- 2:4 *katham bhīṣmam ahaṃ saṃkhye : droṇam ca madhusūdana  
iṣubhiḥ pratiyotsyāmi : pūjārḥāv arisūdana*  
[A:] How will I fight in battle with arrows against Bhīṣma and Droṇa? Both  
deserve respect.
- 2:5 *gurūn ahatvā hi mahānubhāvāñ : śreyo bhoktuṃ bhaiḥsam apītha loke  
hatvārthakāmāms tu gurūn ihaiva : bhunḥjīya bhogān rudhirapradigdhān*  
I would prefer to not kill *gurus* of great authority and eat alms-food in the  
world, than to kill wealth-desiring *gurus* here and enjoy blood-stained delights.
- 2:6 *na caitad vidmaḥ kataran no garīyo : yad vā jayema yadi vā no jayeyuḥ  
yān eva hatvā na jijīviṣāmas : te 'vasthitāḥ pramukhe dhārtarāṣṭrāḥ*  
And we do not know this: which of the two is more important for us, either that  
we win or that they beat us. The sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, having killed whom we do  
not wish to live, stand facing [us].
- 2:7 *kārpaṇyadoṣopahatasvabhāvaḥ : pṛcchāmi tvā dharmasammūḍhacetāḥ*

*yac chreyaḥ syān niścitaṃ brūhi tan me : śiṣyas te 'haṃ sādhi mām tvāṃ  
prapannam*

My *svabhāva* afflicted by weakness and *doṣa*, my consciousness confused over *dharma*, I ask you, tell me decidedly what would be better. I am your disciple: instruct me, the one resorting to you.

2:8 *na hi prapaśyāmi mamāpan udyād : yac chokam ucchoṣaṇam indriyāṇām  
avāpya bhūmāv asapatnam ṛddham : rājyaṃ surāṇām api cādhipatyam*  
I do not see what might remove the sorrow parching my senses, were I to obtain prosperous, unrivalled kingship on earth and power over even the celestial ones.

2:9 *evam uktvā hr̥ṣīkeśaṃ : guḍākeśaḥ paramtapaḥ  
na yotsya iti govindam : uktvā tūṣṇīṃ babhūva ha*  
Having said this to [Kṛṣṇa], [Arjuna] said 'I am not going to fight' to [Kṛṣṇa], and became silent.

(...)

2:11 *aśocyān anvaśocas tvam : prajñāvādāṃś ca bhāṣase  
gatāsūn agatāsūṃś ca : nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ*  
[K:] You have been grieving for those who are not to be grieved for, yet you speak words of wisdom. The learned do not grieve for the dead or the living.

2:12 *na tv evāhaṃ jātu nāsaṃ : na tvam neme janādhipāḥ  
na caiva na bhaviṣyāmaḥ : sarve vayam ataḥ param*  
For never did I not be, nor did you, nor did these people-rulers, nor will any of us not be hereafter.

2:13 *dehino 'smin yathā dehe : kaumāraṃ yauvanaṃ jarā  
tathā dehāntaraprāptir : dhīras tatra na muhyati*  
Just as in this body [there is] childhood, youth and old age of the embodied one (*dehin*), so [there is] acquisition of another body. The resolute person is not confused by this.

2:14 *mātrāsparśās tu kaunteya : śtūṣṇasukhaduḥkhadāḥ  
āgamāpāyino 'nityās : tāṃś titikśasva bhārata*  
Contacts with things, giving cold and heat, happiness and sorrow, are transient, unstable. Endure them.

2:15 *yaṃ hi na vyathayanty ete : puruṣaṃ puruṣarṣabha  
samaduḥkhasukhaṃ dhīraṃ : so 'mṛtatvayā kalpate*  
That person is adapted to immortality whom these do not disquiet, to whom happiness and sorrow are the same, [who is] resolute.

2:16 *nāsate vidyate bhāvo : nābhāvo vidyate sataḥ  
ubhayaḥ api dr̥ṣṭo 'ntas : tv anayos tattvadarśibhiḥ*  
No coming into existence is found for the *asat*, nor passing out of existence for the *sat*. The border of these two is seen by those who see the *tattva*'s.

2:17 *avināśī tu tadviddhi : yena sarvam idaṃ tatam  
vināśam avyayasyāsyā : na kaścit kartum arhati*  
Know as imperishable that by which all this is spread. Nobody is able to effect



the destruction of this imperishable

- 2:18 *antavanta ime dehā : nityasyoktāḥ śarīraṇaḥ*  
*anāśino 'prameyasya : tasmād yuddhyasva bhārata*  
These bodies of the perpetual, unperishing, immeasurable *dehin* are said to have ends. So fight!
- 2:19 *ya enam veti hantāraṃ : yaś cainaṃ manyate hatam*  
*ubhau tau na vijānīto : nāyaṃ hanti na hanyate*  
Neither the one who knows it<sup>1</sup> as a killer, nor the one who thinks of it as slain, understand. It does not kill, nor is killed.
- 2:20 *na jāyate mriyate vā kadācin : nāyaṃ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ*  
*ajo nityaḥ śāśvato 'yaṃ purāṇo : na hanyate hanyamāne śarīre*  
It is not born, nor at any time does it die, nor, having become, is it again a becomer. It is unborn, invariable, eternal and ancient: the body being killed, it is not killed.
- 2:21 *vedāvināśinaṃ nityaṃ : ya enam ajam avyayam*  
*kathaṃ sa puruṣaḥ pārtha : kaṃ ghātayati hanti kaṃ*  
How can the person who knows it as imperishable, invariable, unborn and unchanging, be caused to kill, or kill, and whom would they kill?
- 2:22 *vāsāṃsi jīrṇāni yathā vihāya : navāni grhnāti naro 'parāṇi*  
*tathā śarīrāni vihāya jīrṇāny : anyāni saṃyāti navāni dehī*  
Just as a person, abandoning old garments, takes other new ones, so *dehin*, abandoning old bodies, comes into other new ones.
- 2:23 *nainaṃ chindanti śastrāṇi : nainaṃ dahati pāvakaḥ*  
*na cainaṃ kledayanty āpo : na śoṣayati mārutaḥ*  
Swords do not cut it, fire does not burn it, waters do not wet it, wind does not dry it.
- 2:24 *acchedyo 'yam adāhyo 'yam : akledyo 'śoṣya eva ca*  
*nityaḥ sarvagataḥ sthāṇur : acalo 'yam sanātanaḥ*  
It is uncuttable, unburnable, unwettable, un-dry-out-able. It is invariable, all-pervading, firm, unmoving and eternal.
- 2:25 *avyakto 'yam acintyo 'yam : avikāryo 'yam ucyate*  
*tasmād evaṃ viditvainaṃ : nānuśocitum arhasi*  
It is unmanifest, unthinkable, said to be untransformable. So, knowing it thus, you ought not to grieve.
- 2:26 *atha cainaṃ nityajātaṃ : nityaṃ vā manyase mṛtam*  
*tathāpi tvaṃ mahābāho : nainaṃ śocitum arhasi*  
Now, you consider it to be continually born or continually dead: notwithstanding, you ought not to grieve over it.
- 2:27 *jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyur : dhruvaṃ janma mṛtasya ca*

<sup>1</sup> The text uses masculine and neuter pronouns variously when referring to *dehin*: I have used the neuter 'it' throughout to avoid confusion.

*tasmād aparihārye 'rthe : na tvam śocitum arhasi*

The death of the born one is certain, and the birth of the dead one is certain. So, the matter being inevitable, you ought not to grieve.

2:28 *avyaktādīni bhūtāni : vyaktamadyāni bhārata*  
*avyaktanidhanāny eva : tatra kā paridevanā*  
Creatures have unmanifest beginnings, manifest middles and unmanifest ends. What's the complaint here?

2:29 *āścaryavat paśyati kaścīd enam : āścaryavad vadati tathaiva cānyah*  
*āścaryavac caīnam anyah śṛṇoti : śrutvā 'py enam veda na caiva kaścīd*  
Rarely does anyone see it, rarely does another proclaim it, rarely does another hear about it, and, even having heard, no one knows it.

2:30 *dehī nityam avadhyo 'yam : dehe sarvasya bhārata*  
*tasmāt sarvāni bhūtāni : na tvam śocitum arhasi*  
This *dehin* is always inviolable in anyone's body, so you ought not to grieve for any creature.

2:31 *svadharmam api cāveksya : na vikampitum arhasi*  
*dharmyād dhi yuddhāc chreyo 'nyat : kṣatriyasya na vidyate*  
You should attend to your own *dharma* and not tremble. No other thing is found better for a *kṣatriya* than a *dharmic* war.

2:32 *yadṛcchayā copapannaṃ : svargadvāram apāvṛtam*  
*sukhinaḥ kṣatriyāḥ pārtha : labhante yuddham īdrśam*  
An open door to heaven has been obtained by chance. Happy *kṣatriyas* find such a war!

(...)

2:37 *hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṃ : jtvā vā bhoksyase mahīm*  
*tasmād uttiṣṭha kaunteya : yuddhāya kṛtaniścayaḥ*  
Either, killed, you will obtain heaven, or, having won, you will enjoy the earth. So stand up, resolution made for the battle.

(...)

2:40 *nehābhikramanāśo 'sti : pratyavāyo na vidyate*  
*svalpam apy asya dharmasya : trāyate mahato bhayāt*  
Here there is no unsuccessful effort: disappointment is not found. Even a very small amount of this *dharma* rescues from great danger.

2:41 *vyavasāyātmikā buddhir : ekeha kurunandana*  
*bahuśākhā hy anantāś ca : buddhayo 'vyavasāyīnām*  
The single *buddhi* is here composed of resolve: the *buddhis* of the irresolute are many-branched and endless.

2:42 *yām imāṃ puspitāṃ vācam : pravadanty avipaścītaḥ*  
*vedavādarataḥ pārtha : nānyad astīti vādinaḥ*  
[see next verse]

2:43 *kāmātmānaḥ svargaparā : janmakarmaphalapradām*  
*kriyāviśeṣabahulāṃ : bhogaiśvaryaḡatīṃ prati*

The ignorant, whose spirit is desire, intent on heaven, disputatious about the Veda/s, saying that there is nothing else, utter this flowery speech for the obtaining of delights and power. Accompanied by particular acts, it yields birth as the fruit of actions.

- 2:44 *bhogaiśvaryaprasaktānām : tayā 'pahṛtacetasām  
vyavasāyātmikā buddhiḥ : samādhau na vidhīyate*  
A *buddhi* in concentration, consisting of resolve, is not made to hesitate by this [speech] of those attached to delights and power, whose intelligence has been removed.
- 2:45 *traiguṇyaviśayā vedā : nistraiguṇyo bhavārjuna  
nirdvandvo nityasattvastha : niryogaḥśema ātmavān*  
The Vedas are centred on the three *guṇas*. Become free of the three *guṇas*, free of the *dvandvas*, standing always on truth, free of acquisition and preservation, self-composed.
- 2:46 *yāvān artha udapāne : sarvataḥ samplutodake  
tāvān sarveṣu vedeṣu : brāhmaṇasya vijānataḥ*  
As much profit [as there is] in a well whose water is overflowed everywhere, so much [profit is there] in all the Vedas for an understanding *brāhmaṇa*.
- 2:47 *karmaṇy evādhikāras te : mā phaleṣu kadācana  
mā karmaphalāhetur bhūr : mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi*  
Your prerogative (*adhikāra*) is in the action alone, not ever in the fruits. Do not become one whose motive is the fruit of the action. May your attachment not be to inaction.
- 2:48 *yogasthaḥ kuru karmāni : saṅgaṃ tyaktvā dhanañjaya  
siddhyasiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā : samatvaṃ yoga ucyate*  
Do actions abiding in *yoga*, having renounced attachment, having become equal in success and failure. *Yoga* is said to be equanimity.
- 2:49 *dūreṇa hy avaram karma : buddhiyogād dhanañjaya  
buddhau śaraṇam anviccha : kṛpaṇāḥ phalāhetavaḥ*  
Action is far less important than *buddhiyoga*. Seek refuge in *buddhi*! The miserable ones are those whose motive is the fruit.
- 2:50 *buddhiyukto jahātīha : ubhe sukṛtaduṣkṛte  
tasmād yogāya yujyasva : yogaḥ karmaṣu kauśalam*  
The one yoked by *buddhi* leaves both good and bad actions here. So be yoked for *yoga*! *Yoga* is skilfulness in actions.
- 2:51 *karmajaṃ buddhiyuktā hi : phalaṃ tyaktvā manīṣiṇaḥ  
janmabandhavinirmuktāḥ : padaṃ gacchanty anāmayaṃ*  
The wise, yoked by *buddhi*, having renounced the fruit born of action, free from the bond of [re]birth, go to the undiseased station.
- 2:52 *yadā te mohakalilaṃ : buddhir vyatitariṣyati  
tadā gantāsi nirvedaṃ : śrotavyasya śrutasya ca*  
When *buddhi* overcomes your impenetrable delusion, you will become indifferent to that which is to be, and that which has been, heard.

- 2:53 *śrutivipratipannā te : yadā sthāsyati niścalā  
samādhāv acalā buddhis : tadā yogam avāpsyasi*  
When your *buddhi*, perplexed by what you have heard, remains steady, immovable in concentration, then you will attain *yoga*.
- 2:54 *sthitaprajñasya kā bhāṣā : samādhisthasya keśava  
sthitadhīḥ kiṃ prabhāseta : kim āsīta vrajeta kim*  
[A:] What is the description of one whose wisdom is firm, who remains in concentration? What might one whose understanding abides say? How might they sit? How might they move?
- 2:55 *prajahāti yadā kāmān : sarvān pārtha manogatān  
ātmany evātmanā tuṣṭaḥ : sthitaprajñas tadocyate*  
[K:] When one renounces all desires existing in the mind, pleased with the self alone by means of the self, then one is said to be firm in wisdom.
- 2:56 *duḥkheṣv anudvignamanāḥ : sukheṣu vigatasprhaḥ  
vītarāgabhayakrodhaḥ : sthitadhīr munir ucyate*  
The one who is unperplexed in mind by sorrows, whose longing for pleasures is departed, whose passion, fear and anger have departed, is called a *muni* of firm understanding.
- 2:57 *yaḥ sarvatrānabhisnehas : tattat prāpya śubhāśubham  
nābhinandati na dveṣṭi : tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*  
The wisdom of the one who has no affection anywhere, who, obtaining anything good or bad, does not welcome or hate, is secure.
- 2:58 *yadā saṃharate cāyaṃ : kūrmo 'ngānīva sarvaśaḥ  
indriyāṇīndriyārthebhyas : tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*  
One's wisdom is secure when one withdraws the senses completely from the objects of sense, like a tortoise [its] limbs.
- 2:59 *viṣayā vinivartante : nirāhārasya dehinaḥ  
rasavarjaṃ raso 'py asya : param drṣṭvā nivartate*  
The concerns (*viṣayas*) of an abstinent *dehin* disappear, but not the taste. Having seen the highest, even its taste ceases.
- 2:60 *yato hy api kaunteya : puruṣasya vipaścitāḥ  
indriyāṇi pramāthīni : haranti prasabhaṃ manaḥ*  
The troubling senses forcibly overpower the mind of a learned person, even one taking pains.
- 2:61 *tāni sarvāni saṃnyamya : yukta āsīta matparaḥ  
vaśe hi yasyendriyāṇi : tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*  
One should restrain all of those [senses] and sit, yoked, devoted to me. The wisdom of the one whose senses are under control is secure.
- 2:62 *dhyāyato viṣayān puṃsaḥ : saṅgas teṣūpajāyate  
saṅgāt sañjāyate kāmaḥ : kāmāt krodho 'bhijāyate*  
For a person imagining objects of sense, attachment to them is born. Desire arises from attachment; anger is produced from desire.

- 2:63 *krodhād bhavati sammohah : sammohāt smṛtivibhramah  
smṛtibhramśād buddhināśo : buddhināśāt prañāsyati*  
Confusion arises from anger; from confusion, bewilderment of memory; from failure of memory, destruction of *buddhi*; from destruction of *buddhi*, one is lost.
- 2:64 *rāgadveṣaviyuktaiḥ tu : viṣayān indriyaiś caran  
ātmaśayair vidheyātmā : prasādam adhigacchati*  
But the one whose self is submissive, moving around the objects of sense (*viṣayas*) with senses under control of the self and detached from passion and dislike, achieves purity.
- 2:65 *prasāde sarvaduḥkhānām : hānir asyopajāyate  
prasannacetaso hy āśu : buddhiḥ paryavatiṣṭhate*  
For the pure one occurs the decrease of all sorrows. The *buddhi* of the pure-thinking one immediately becomes steady.
- 2:66 *nāsti buddhir ayuktasya : na cāyuktasya bhāvanā  
na cābhāvayataḥ śāntir : aśāntasya kutah sukham*  
For the unyoked, there is no *buddhi*; for the unyoked, no effectiveness; for the ineffectual, no peace: and how [is there] happiness for the unpeaceful?
- 2:67 *indriyānām hi caratām : yan mano 'nuvidhīyate  
tad asya harati prajñām : vāyur nāvam ivāmbhasi*  
The mind which yields to the moving senses takes away one's wisdom like the wind a boat on the water.
- 2:68 *tasmād yasya mahābāho : nigrhītāni sarvaśaḥ  
indriyānīndriyārthebhyas : tasya prajñā pratiṣṭhitā*  
Thus, the one whose senses are completely held back from sense-objects is the one whose wisdom is secure.
- 2:69 *yā niśā sarvabhūtānām : tasyām jāgarti saṁyamī  
yasyām jāgrati bhūtāni : sā niśā paśyato muneh*  
The one who restrains [the senses] is awake in what is night for all creatures. The creatures are awake in what is night for the observant *muni*.
- 2:70 *āpūryamāṇam acalapratiṣṭham : samudram āpaḥ praviśanti yadvat  
tadvat kāmā yaṁ praviśanti sarve : sa śāntim āpnoti na kāmakāmī*  
As waters enter the ocean, which is steadfast and immovable, being filled up, just so do all desires enter the one who, not desirous of desires, attains peace.
- 2:71 *vihāya kāmān yaḥ sarvān : pumāṁś carati niḥsprhaḥ  
nirmamo nirahaṁkāraḥ : sa śāntim adhigacchati*  
The person who renounces all desires and goes about free from longing, 'mine'-less, *ahaṁkāra*-less, achieves peace.
- 2:72 *eṣā brāhmī sthitiḥ pārtha : nainām prāpya vimuhyati  
sthitvā 'syām antakāle 'pi : brahma nirvāṇam ṛcchati*  
This is the state of *brahman*: having attained it, one is not perplexed [or not having attained this, one is perplexed]. Remaining in it even at the hour of

death, one goes to *brahman-nirvāṇa*.

- 3:1  *jyāyasī cet karmanas te : matā buddhir janārdana  
tat kiṃ karmaṇi ghore māṃ : niyojayasi keśava  
[A:] If you consider *buddhi* superior to action, why do you enjoin me to a  
terrible action?*
- 3:2  *vyāmiśreṇaiva vākyena : buddhiṃ mohayasīva me  
tadekaṃ vada niścītya : yena śreya 'ham āpnuyām  
With quite contradictory speech you cause my *buddhi* to be as if perplexed:  
decide, and indicate the one of them by which I might obtain the better thing.*
- (...)
- 3:4  *na karmaṇām anārambhān : naiṣkarmyaṃ puruṣo 'śnute  
na ca samnyasanād eva : siddhiṃ samadhigacchati  
[K:] A person does not attain *karma*[*bandha*]-lessness from not undertaking  
actions: not from renunciation [of action] do they obtain success.*
- 3:5  *na hi kaścit kṣaṇam api : jātu tiṣṭhaty akarmakṛt  
kāryate hy avaśaḥ karma : sarvaḥ prakṛtijair guṇaiḥ  
No one ever even for a moment remains inactive, for each is made to perform  
action unwisely by the *guṇas* born of *prakṛti*.*
- 3:6  *karmendriyāṇi samyamya : ya āste manasā smaran  
indriyārthān vimūdhātmā : mithyācāraḥ sa ucyate  
The one who, curbing the organs of action, sits remembering sense-objects  
with the mind, is self-perplexed and is said to be one of wrong conduct.*
- 3:7  *yas tv indriyāṇi manasā : niyamyārabhate 'rjuna  
karmendriyaiḥ karmayogam : asaktaḥ sa viśiṣyate  
The one who regulates the senses by means of the mind, and undertakes  
*karmayoga* with the organs of action, unattached, is pre-eminent.*
- 3:8  *niyatam kuru karma tvam : karma jyāyo hy akarmanah  
śarīrayātrāpi ca te na : prasiddhyed akarmanah  
Perform the established action, for action is better than inaction: from inaction,  
not even the maintenance of your body may be accomplished.*
- 3:9  *yajñārthāt karmaṇo 'nyatra : loko 'yaṃ karmabandhanah  
tadārtham karma kaunteya : muktasaṅgah samācara  
This world is bound by action, except for action for the purpose of *yajña*.  
Perform action for that purpose, freed from attachment.*
- 3:10  *sahayajñāḥ prajāḥ sṛṣtvā : purovāca prajāpatiḥ  
anena prasaviśyadhvam : eṣa vo 'stv iṣṭakāmadhuk  
Prajāpati of old, having sent forth creatures capable of *yajña*, said: 'Be caused  
by this to bear fruit! May this be the granter of your desired pleasures.*
- 3:11  *devān bhāvayatānena : te devā bhāvayantu vah  
parasparam bhāvayantaḥ : śreyaḥ param avāpsyatha  
Sustain the *devas* with it, and may those *devas* sustain you. Sustaining each  
other, you will obtain supreme good.*

- 3:12 *iṣṭān bhogān hi vo devā : dāsyante yajñabhāvitāḥ*  
*tair dattān apradāyaibhyo : yo bhuñkte stena eva saḥ*  
 Sustained by sacrifice, the *devas* will give the delights you wish for. The one who, without giving to these [*devas*], enjoys what is given by them, is a thief indeed’.
- 3:13 *yajñasiṣṭāsīnaḥ santo : mucyante sarvakilbiṣaiḥ*  
*bhuñjate te tv aghaṁ pāpā : ye pacanty ātmakāraṇāt*  
 The honest, eaters of what is left over from *yajña*, are freed from all stains, but the wicked, who cook by reason of themselves, experience evil.
- 3:14 *annād bhavanti bhūtāni : parjanyaḍ annasambhavaḥ*  
*yajñād bhavati parjanyo : yajñāḥ karmasamudbhavaḥ*  
 Creatures come about from food; food’s appearance from the rain cloud; the rain cloud from *yajña*; *yajña* from action.
- 3:15 *karma brahmodbhavaṁ viddhi : brahmākṣarasamudbhavam*  
*tasmāt sarvagataṁ brahma : nityaṁ yajñe pratiṣṭhitam*  
 Know that action is produced by *brahman*; *brahman* arises from the imperishable [*or* from the syllable, *i.e.* ‘*om*’]. Therefore the all-pervading *brahman* is always present in *yajña*.
- 3:16 *evaṁ pravartitaṁ cakraṁ : nānuvartayatītha yaḥ*  
*aghāyur indriyārāmo : moghaṁ pārtha sa jīvati*  
 The one who does not here cause the wheel thus set in motion to roll forward is malicious, delighted by the senses, and lives in vain.
- 3:17 *yas tv ātmaratir eva syād : ātmatrptaś ca mānavaḥ*  
*ātmany eva ca samtustas : tasya kāryaṁ na vidyate*  
 But the person who would take pleasure in the self alone, be pleased with the self and content with the self alone, there is found no work for such a one to do.
- 3:18 *naiva tasya kṛtenārtho : nākṛteneha kaścana*  
*na cāsya sarvabhūteṣu : kaścit arthavyapāśrayaḥ*  
 Such a one does not even have any concern with what is done or not done in this world, nor amongst all creatures is anybody his / her concern or refuge.
- 3:19 *tasmād asaktaḥ satataṁ : kāryaṁ karma samācara*  
*asakto hy ācaran karma : param āpnoti pūruṣaḥ*  
 So, always unattached, perform the action that must be done; for the unattached person practising action reaches the highest.
- 3:20 *karmaṇaiva hi saṁsiddhim : āsthitā janakādayaḥ*  
*lokasaṁgrahaṁ evāpi : sampaśyan kartum arhasi*  
 Janaka *et al.* attained perfection by means of action alone. You must act attending only to the holding-together of the world (*lokasaṁgraha*).
- 3:21 *yadyad ācarati śreṣṭhas : tattad evetaro janaḥ*  
*sa yat pramānaṁ kurute : lokas tad anuvartate*  
 Whatever the best one does, the other folk do the very same. The folk follow

the standard which he / she sets up.

- 3:22 *na me pārthāsti kartavyam : triṣu lokeṣu kiṃcana  
nānavāptam avāptavyam : varte eva ca karmaṇi*  
For me there is nothing to be done, nothing in the three worlds unobtained [but] to be obtained. Even so, I move in action.
- 3:23 *yadi hy aham na varteyam : jātu karmaṇy atandritaḥ  
mama vartmānuvartante : manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ*  
If I should ever not, unwearied, move in action, people would completely follow my path.
- 3:24 *utsīdeyur ime lokā : na kuryām karma ced aham  
saṃkarasya ca kartā syām : upahanyām imāḥ prajāḥ*  
These worlds would fall into ruin were I not to perform action: I would be the maker of confusion, I would destroy these creatures.
- 3:25 *saktāḥ karmaṇy avidvāṃso : yathā kurvanti bhārata  
kuryād vidvāṃs tathāsaktaś : cikīsur lokasaṃgraha*  
As the unknowing ones, attached to action, act, just so should the knowing, unattached one act, desiring to effect *lokasaṃgraha*.
- 3:26 *na buddhibhedam janayed : ajñānām karmasaṅginām  
joṣayet sarvakarmāni : vidvān yuktaḥ samācaran*  
One should not give rise to the *buddhi*-splitting of the unknowing ones attached to action. The wise, yoked one, acting, should delight in all actions.
- 3:27 *prakṛteḥ kriyamānāni : guṇaiḥ karmāni sarvaśaḥ  
ahaṃkāravimūdhātmā : kartāham iti manyate*  
Actions are being done wholly by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti*. The one whose self is bewildered by *ahaṃkāra* thinks 'I am the doer'.
- 3:28 *tattvavit tu mahābāho : guṇakarmavibhāgayoḥ  
guṇā guṇeṣu vartanta : iti matvā na sajjate*  
The knower of the truth of the distributions of *guṇas* and actions thinks 'the *guṇas* are moving amongst the *guṇas*', and does not attach themselves.
- 3:29 *prakṛter guṇasammūdhāḥ : sajjante guṇakarmasu  
tān akṛtsnavido mandān : kṛtsnavin na vicālayet*  
Those bewildered by the *guṇas* of *prakṛti* are attached to the actions of the *guṇas*. The one who knows all should not agitate the stupid who do not know all.
- 3:30 *mayi sarvāṇi karmāni : samnyasyādhyātmacetasā  
nirāśīr mirmamo bhūtvā : yudhyasva vigatajvaraḥ*  
Resign all actions to me by means of consciousness of the overself (*adhyātman*), become wishless, 'mine'-less, and fight, with fever gone.
- (...)
- 3:35 *śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ : paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt  
svadharme nidhanaṃ śreyaḥ : paradharmo bhayāvahaḥ*  
One's own poor *dharma* is better than the well-performed *dharma* of another.



Another's *dharma* is perilous: better is annihilation in one's own *dharma*.

- 3:36 *atha kena prayukto 'yaṃ : pāpaṃ carati pūruṣaḥ*  
*anicchann api vārṣṇeya : balād iva niyojitaḥ*  
[A:] Urged by what, then, does the person do *pāpa*? Even the one who does not wish to is compelled, as if by force.
- 3:37 *kāma eṣa krodha eṣa : rajoguṇasamudbhavaḥ*  
*mahāśano mahāpāpmā : viddhy enam iha vairiṇam*  
[K:] This is desire, this is anger, whose origin is the *guṇa* of *rajas*: voracious, greatly evil, know it to be the enemy here.
- 3:38 *dhūmenāvriyate vahnir : yathā 'darśo malena ca*  
*yatholbenāvṛto garbhas : tathā tenedam āvṛtam*  
Just as a fire is covered by smoke, a mirror by dust, and a foetus by the membrane, so is this [world] covered by that [desire / anger].
- 3:39 *āvṛtam jñānam etena : jñānino nityavairiṇā*  
*kāmarūpeṇa kaunteya : duṣpūreṇānalena ca*  
Knowledge is covered by this, the continual enemy of the knower, a protean and insatiable fire [or an insatiable fire in the form of desire].
- 3:40 *indriyāṇi mano buddhir : asyādhiṣṭhānam ucyate*  
*etair vimohayaty eṣa : jñānam āvṛtya dehinam*  
The senses, mind [and] *buddhi* are said to be its seat. Through these it hides knowledge and perplexes *dehin* [or it hides *dehin* and perplexes knowledge].
- 3:41 *tasmāt tvam indriyāṇy ādau : niyamyā bharatarṣabha*  
*pāpmānaṃ prajāhi hy enam : jñānavijñānanāśanam*  
So, having first restrained the senses, kill this evil destroyer of knowledge and understanding.
- 3:42 *indriyāṇi parāṇy āhur : indriyebhyaḥ param manaḥ*  
*manasas tu parā buddhir : yo buddheḥ paratas tu saḥ*  
They say the senses are exalted, the mind is higher than the senses, and *buddhi* is higher than the mind: but what is higher than *buddhi* is it [*dehin*].
- 3:43 *evaṃ buddheḥ param buddhvā : samstabhyātmānam ātmanā*  
*jahi śatruṃ mahābāho : kāmarūpaṃ durāsadam*  
So know that which is higher than *buddhi*, strengthen the self by means of the self, and kill the hard-to-approach enemy in the form of desire [or the hard-to-approach protean enemy].
- 4:1 *imaṃ vivasvate yogaṃ : proktavān aham avyayam*  
*vivasvān manave prāha : manur ikṣvākave 'bravīt*  
I uttered this undecaying *yoga* for Vivasvat (the sun), Vivasvat uttered [it] for Manu, Manu uttered [it] for Ikṣvāku.
- 4:2 *evaṃ paramparāprāptam : imaṃ rājarsayo viduḥ*  
*sa kāleneha mahatā : yogo naṣṭaḥ paramtapa*  
The royal sages knew it, obtained in this way by succession. The *yoga* was lost to the earth through great time (*kāla*).

- 4:3 *sa evāyaṃ mayā te 'dya : yogaḥ proktaḥ purāṇaḥ  
bhakto 'si me sakhā ceti : rahasyaṃ hy etad uttamam*  
This, the same ancient *yoga*, is uttered by me for you today. You are loyal and my friend, hence this highest secret.
- (...)
- 4:6 *ajo 'pi sann avyayātmā : bhūtānām īśvaro 'pi san  
prakṛtiṃ svām adhiṣṭhāya : sambhavāmy ātmamāyayā*  
Though being unborn, the imperishable self, though being Lord of the creatures, I inhabit my own *prakṛti* and couple with my own *māyā*.
- 4:7 *yadā yadā hi dharmasya : glānir bhavati bhārata  
abhyutthānam adharmasya : tadā 'tmānaṃ sṛjāmy aham*  
Whenever there occurs an exhaustion of *dharma*, a rise in *adharmā*, then I send myself forth.
- 4:8 *paritrāṇāya sādḥūnāṃ : vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām  
dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya : sambhavāmi yuge yuge*  
For the rescue of the honest and the destruction of the wicked, for the sake of the regulation of *dharma*, I am born in age after age.
- 4:9 *janma karma ca me divyam : evaṃ yo vetti tattvataḥ  
tyaktvā dehaṃ punarjanma : naiti mām eti so 'rjuna*  
The one who truly knows thus my birth and celestial action, having given up the body, does not go to rebirth [but] goes to me.
- 4:10 *vītarāgabhayakrodhā : manmayā mām upāśritāḥ  
bahavo jñānatapasā : pūtā madbhāvam āgatāḥ*  
Many, their passion, fear and anger gone, delighting in me, taking refuge in me, cleansed by the austerity of knowledge, have attained to my being.
- (...)
- 4:12 *kāṅkṣantaḥ karmanām siddhiṃ : yajanta iha devatāḥ  
kṣipraṃ hi mānuṣe loke : siddhir bhavati karmajā*  
Desiring success for [their] actions, [people] in this world offer to the *devas*. In the human world, the success born of action comes quickly.
- 4:13 *cāturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭaṃ : guṇakarmavibhāgaśaḥ  
tasya kartāram api mām : viddhy akartāram avyayam*  
The four *varṇas* were emitted by me, actions divided according to *guṇa* [or divided in actions and *guṇas*]. Know me, though [I am] the producer of this, as the imperishable non-actor.
- 4:14 *na mām karmāṇi limpanti : na me karmaphale spr̥ha  
iti mām yo 'bhijānāti : karmabhir na sa badhyate*  
Actions do not stain me. There is no delight for me in the fruit of action/s. The one who perceives me in this way, is not bound by actions.
- (...)
- 4:16 *kiṃ karma kim akarmeti : kavayo 'py atra mohitāḥ  
tat te karma pravakṣyāmi : yaj jñātvā mokṣyase 'śubhāt*

What is action, what inaction? Even the *kavis* are confused here. I will tell you [about] that 'action', knowing [about] which you will be free of evil (*aśubha*).

(...)

4:18 *karmany akarma yaḥ paśyed : akarmaṇi ca karma yaḥ  
sa buddhimān manuṣyeṣu : sa yuktaḥ kṛtsnakarmakṛt*  
The one who can see inaction (*i.e. karmabandha*-lessness) in action, who [can see] *karma(bandha)* in inaction, has understanding of people, and is yoked, the complete action-doer.

4:19 *yasya sarve samārambhāḥ : kāmasaṅkalpavarjitāḥ  
jñānāgnidagdhakarmāṇaṃ : tam āhuḥ paṇḍitaṃ budhāḥ*  
The wise call that one a *paṇḍit*, whose every undertaking is without intention / volition (*saṅkalpa*) or desire, whose *karma(bandha)* has been burnt in the fire of knowledge.

4:20 *tyaktvā karmaphalāsaṅgaṃ : nityatrpto nirāśrayaḥ  
karmany abhipravṛtto 'pi : naiva kiñcit karoti saḥ*  
Having renounced attachment to the fruit/s of action/s, ever pleased, independent, that one, though engaged in action, does nothing at all (*i.e. accrues no karmabandha*).

(...)

4:22 *yadrcchālābhasamtuṣṭo : dvandvātīto vimatsara  
samaḥ siddhāvasiddhau ca : kṛtvā 'pi na nibadhyate*  
Contented by chance gains, having overcome the *dvandvas*, free from envy, equal in success and failure, [that one] acts but is not bound.

4:23 *gataśaṅgasya muktasya : jñānāvasthitacetasaḥ  
yajñāyācarataḥ karma : samagraṃ pravilīyate*  
The *karma(bandha)* of the freed one, whose attachment is gone, whose consciousness is given up to knowledge, who acts for [the sake of] *yajña*, totally melts away.

4:24 *brahmārpaṇaṃ brahmahavir : brahmāgnau brahmanā hutam  
brahmaiva tena gantavyaṃ : brahmakarmasamādhinā*  
The *brahman*-offering, the *brahman*-oblation is poured into the *brahman*-fire by *brahman*. *Brahman* is reachable, indeed, by the one who restores action to *brahman*.

4:25 *daivam evāpare yajñaṃ : yoginaḥ paryupāsate  
brahmāgnāv apare yajñaṃ : yajñenaivopajuhvati*  
Some *yogins* attend to *yajña* for the *devas*, others offer *yajña* in the *brahman*-fire with *yajña* alone.

4:26 *śrotrādīnīndriyāṇy anye : saṃyamāgniṣu juhvati  
śabdādīn viṣayān anya : indriyāgniṣu juhvati*  
Others offer the senses, hearing *etc.*, into the fires of restraint, others offer the sense-objects (*viṣayas*), sound *etc.*, into the fires of of the senses.

4:27 *sarvāṇīndriyakarmāṇi : prāṇakarmāṇi cāpare*

*ātmasaṃyamayogāgnau : juhvati jñānadīpīte*

Others offer all the sense-acts and breath-acts into the knowledge-illuminated fire of the *yoga* of self-restraint.

- 4:28 *dravyayajñās tapoyajñā : yogayajñās tathāpare*  
*svādhyāyajñānayajñās ca : yatayaḥ saṃśītavratāḥ*  
[There are] other rigid-vowed strivers, also, whose *yajñā* is of objects, or of austerities, or of *yoga*, or of knowledge of solitary recitation.
- 4:29 *apāne juhvati prāṇaṃ : prāṇe 'pānaṃ tathā 'pare*  
*prāṇāpānagatī rudhvā : prāṇāyāmaparāyanāḥ*  
Still others offer the in-breath in the out-breath, the out-breath in the in-breath, restraining the movement of the the in- and out-breaths, intent on breath exercises.
- 4:30 *apare niyatāhārāḥ : prāṇān prāṇeṣu juhvati*  
*sarve 'py ete yajñavido : yajñaksapitakalmaṣāḥ*  
Others restrict [their] taking food and offer breaths into breaths (*i.e.*, *pace van Buitenen*, do nothing but breathe). All of these *yajñā*-knowers have [their] stains destroyed by *yajñā*.
- 4:31 *yajñāśiṣṭāmṛtabhujo : yānti brahma sanātanam*  
*nāyaṃ loko 'sty ayajñasya : kuto 'nyaḥ kurusattama*  
Those who enjoy the *amṛta* left-over from *yajñā* go to the eternal *brahman*. This world is not for those without *yajñā*, how much less is the other [world]!
- 4:32 *evaṃ bahuvīdhā yajñā : vitatā brahmaṇo mukhe*  
*karmajān viddhi tān sarvān : evaṃ jñātvā vimokṣyase*  
Thus all manner of *yajñās* are spread out in the mouth of *brahman*. Know all of them to be action-born: knowing this you will be freed.
- 4:33 *śreyān dravyamayād yajñāj : jñānayajñāḥ paraṃtapa*  
*sarvaṃ karmākhilam pārtha : jñāne parisamāpyate*  
Knowledge-*yajñā* is better than material *yajñā*. Every action without exception arrives at completion in knowledge.
- (...)
- 4:38 *na hi jñānena sadṛśaṃ : pavitram iha vidyate*  
*tat svayaṃ yogasaṃsiddhah : kālenātmāni vindati*  
In the world, there is found no means of purification the like of knowledge. One accomplished in *yoga* finds it, through time (*kāla*), by themselves, in themselves.
- 4:39 *śraddhāvāml labhate jñānaṃ : tatparaḥ saṃyatendriyaḥ*  
*jñānaṃ labdhvā parāṃ śāntim : acireṇādhiḡacchati*  
The faithful one, senses restrained, devoted to it, obtains knowledge. Having obtained knowledge, he / she soon reaches the highest peace.
- (...)
- 4:41 *yogasamnyastakarmānaṃ : jñānasañchinnaśāyama*  
*ātmavantam na karmāṇi : nibadhnanti dhanamjaya*  
Actions do not bind the one whose *karmans* are relinquished through *yoga*,

whose doubts are cut away by knowledge, who is self-possessed.

- 4:42 *tasmād ajñānasambhūtaṃ : hṛtsthaṃ jñānāsinātmanaḥ  
chittvainam saṃśayaṃ yogam : ātiṣṭhottistha bhārata*  
So cut away this ignorance-born self-doubt from your heart with the sword of knowledge, practise *yoga*, and stand up!
- (...)
- 5:2 *saṃnyāsaḥ karmayogaś ca : niḥśreyasakarāv ubhau  
tayos tu karmasaṃnyāsāt : karmayogo viśiṣyate*  
Renunciation and *karmayoga* both cause that than which there is nothing better, but, of the two, *karmayoga* is better than renunciation of action.
- 5:3 *jñeyah sa nityasaṃnyāsī : yo na dveṣṭi na kāṅkṣati  
nirdvandvo hi mahābāho : sukhaṃ bandhāt pramucyate*  
That person is to be known as a perpetual renouncer who neither hates nor desires, who is free from the *dvandvas*, who is easily freed from the bond [of action].
- 5:4 *sāṃkhyayogau pṛthag bālāḥ : pravadanti na paṇḍitāḥ  
ekam apy āsthitāḥ samyag : ubhayor vindate phalam*  
Fools, not *paṇḍits*, speak of *sāṃkhya* and *yoga* as separate. Just one having been practised truly, one finds the fruit of both.
- 5:5 *yat sāṃkhyaiḥ prāpyate sthānaṃ : tad yogair api gamyate  
ekam sāṃkhyam ca yogam ca : yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati*  
The state attained by means of *sāṃkhyas* is reached by means of *yogas* too. That one sees, who sees *sāṃkhya* and *yoga* as one.
- 5:6 *saṃnyāsas tu mahābāho : duḥkham āptum ayogataḥ  
yogayukto munir brahma : na cireṇādhigacchati*  
But it is difficult to obtain renunciation without *yoga*. The *muni* yoked with *yoga* reaches *brahman* before long.
- 5:7 *yogayukto viśuddhātmā : vijitātmā jitendriyaḥ  
sarvabhūtātmabhūtātmā : kurvann api na lipyate*  
The one yoked with *yoga*, whose self has been purified, whose self has been conquered, whose senses have been conquered, whose self has become the self of every creature, though acting, is not stained.
- 5:8 *naiva kiṃcit karomīti : yukto manyeta tattvavit  
paśyan śṛṇvan sprśāṅ jighraṅ : aśnan gacchan svapan śvasan*  
'I am doing nothing at all': the yoked truth-knower should think thus, [while] seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, eating, moving, sleeping, breathing...
- 5:9 *pralapan visṛjan grhṇann : unmiṣan nimiṣann api  
indriyānīndriyārtheṣu : vartanta iti dhārayan*  
...speaking, sending forth, grasping, opening and closing the eyes, remembering that 'the senses are moving among the objects of sense'.
- 5:10 *brahmaṇy ādhāya karmāṇi : saṅgam tyaktvā karoti yaḥ  
lipyate na sa pāpena : padmapatram ivāmbhasā*

The one who acts having delivered actions to *brahman*, having abandoned attachment, is not stained by *pāpa*, as a lotus petal [is not stained] by water.

(...)

5:12

*yuktaḥ karmaphalaṃ tyaktvā : śāntim āpnoti naiṣṭhikīm*  
*ayuktaḥ kāmakāreṇa : phale sakto nibadhyate*

The yoked one, having abandoned the fruit of action, achieves final peace. The unyoked one, attached to fruit, is bound by the working of desire.

5:13

*sarvakarmāṇi manasā : samnyasyāste sukhaṃ vaśī*  
*navadvāre pure dehī : naiva kurvan na kārayan*

Renounce all actions by means of the mind! The master, *dehin*, sits comfortably in the nine-gated city [*i.e.* the body], neither acting nor causing to act.

5:14

*na kartṛtvam na karmāṇi : lokasya sṛjati prabhuh*  
*na karmaphalasaṃyogaṃ : svabhāvas tu pravartate*

The master bestows on people neither agency nor actions nor the connection between action and fruit. *Svabhāva* acts.

(...)

5:17

*tadbuddhayas tadātmānas : tanniṣṭhās tatparāyaṇāḥ*  
*gacchanty apunarāvṛttiṃ : jñānanirdhūtakalmaṣāḥ*

Those whose *buddhi* is [focused on] that [knowledge], whose self is [focused on] that, devoted to that, aiming for that, reach the point of no return, [their] stains destroyed by knowledge.

(...)

5:21

*bāhyasparśeṣv asaktātmā : vindaty ātmani yat sukham*  
*sa brahmayogayuktātmā : sukham akṣayam aśnute*

The one whose self is unattached to contacts with externals finds happiness in him- / herself. The one whose self is yoked by the *yoga* of *brahman* obtains undecaying happiness.

(...)

5:24

*yo 'ntahsukho 'ntarāramas : tathāntarjyotir eva yaḥ*  
*sa yogī brahmanirvāṇam : brahmabhūto 'dhigacchati*

The *yogin*, whose happiness is internal, whose pleasure is internal and whose light is internal, having become *brahman*, attains *brahman-nirvāṇa*

5:25

*labhante brahmanirvāṇam : ṛṣayaḥ kṣīnakalmaṣāḥ*  
*chinnadvaidhā yatātmānaḥ : sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*

The *ṛṣis*, whose stains are destroyed, whose doubts are cut away, who are self-controlled and devoted to the welfare of all beings, obtain *brahman-nirvāṇa*.

(...)

5:29

*bhoktāraṃ yajñatapasāṃ : sarvalokamaheśvaram*  
*suhṛdaṃ sarvabhūtānāṃ : jñātvā māṃ śāntim ṛcchati*

[The *muni*] knows me as the enjoyer of *yajñas* and austerities, the great Lord of all worlds, the friend of all creatures, and attains peace.

6:1

*anāśritaḥ karmaphalaṃ : kāryaṃ karma karoti yaḥ*

*sa samnyāsī ca yogī ca : na niragnir na cākriyaḥ*

The one who performs the action which is to be done, detached from the fruit of action, is a renouncer and a *yogin*, not the one without fire[-*yajña*] and without action.

- 6:2 *yam samnyāsam iti prāhur : yogam tam viddhi pāṇḍava  
na hy asamnyastasaṃkalpo : yogī bhavati kaścana*  
Know as *yoga* that which they call renunciation. Nobody whose *saṃkalpas* are unrenounced becomes a *yogin*.
- 6:3 *āruruḥṣor muner yogam : karma kāraṇam ucyate  
yogārūḍhasya tasyaiva : samaḥ kāraṇam ucyate*  
Action is said to be the means of the *muni* desirous of ascending to *yoga*. Equanimity is said to be the means of the one who has ascended to *yoga*.
- 6:4 *yadā hi nendriyārtheṣu : na karmasv anuṣajjate  
sarvasaṃkalpasamnyāsī : yogārūḍhas tadocyate*  
When one is attached neither to sense-objects nor to actions, having renounced all *saṃkalpas*, then one is called ‘ascended-to-*yoga*’.
- (...)
- 6:10 *yogī yuñjīta satatam : ātmānaṃ rahasi sthitaḥ  
ekāki yatacittātmā : nirāśir aparigrahaḥ*  
The *yogin*, abiding in solitude, alone, thoughts and self controlled, without expectations or property, should constantly yoke him- / herself.
- 6:11 *śucau deśe pratiṣṭhāpya : sthiram āsanam ātmanaḥ  
nātyucchritaṃ nātinīcam : celājinakuśottaram*  
Having established, in a clean place, their own solid seat, neither overhigh nor overflow, topped with cloth, skin or grass...
- 6:12 *tatraikāgraṃ manaḥ kṛtvā : yatacittendriyakriyaḥ  
upaviśyāsane yuñjyād : yogam ātmaviśuddhaye*  
...there, having made the mind one-pointed, the one whose thoughts, senses and activity are controlled should sit on the seat and yoke [themselves to] *yoga* for the sake of self-purification,...
- 6:13 *samaṃ kāyaśirogrīvaṃ : dhārayann acalaṃ sthiraḥ  
samprekṣya nāsikāgraṃ svaṃ : diśaś cānavalokayan*  
...immovable, holding body, head and neck straight and still, looking at the tip of their nose and not looking around.
- 6:14 *praśāntātmā vigatabhīr : brahmacārivrate sthitaḥ  
manaḥ samyamyā maccitto : yukto āsīta matparaḥ*  
Self-composed, fear gone, firm in the *brahmacarya* vow, one should restrain the mind and sit, yoked, thoughts on me, intent on me.
- 6:15 *yuñjann evaṃ sadā ‘tmānaṃ : yogī niyatamānasaḥ  
śāntim nirvāṇaparamāṃ : matsaṃsthāṃ adhigacchati*  
Always yoking him- / herself, the *yogin*, whose mentality is controlled, attains the peace whose apex is *nirvāṇa* and which is based on me.

- 6:16 *nātyaśnatas tu yogo 'sti : na caikāntam anaśnataḥ  
na cātisvapnaśīlasya : jāgrato naiva cārjuna*  
There is no yoga for the one who overeats, nor just for the fasting, nor for the one whose tendency is to oversleep, nor for the [over]wakeful.
- 6:17 *yuktāhāravihārasya : yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu  
yuktasvapnāvabodhasya : yogo bhavati duḥkhahā*  
Yoga is the sorrow-killer for the one whose eating and sport are yoked, whose endeavour is yoked to action, whose sleeping and waking are yoked.
- 6:18 *yadā viniyataṃ cittam : ātmany evāvatiṣṭhate  
niḥsprhaḥ sarvakāmebhyo : yukta ity ucyate tadā*  
When thinking is controlled, absorbed in the self alone, then the one abstaining from all desires is called 'yoked'.
- 6:19 *yathā dīpo nivāstho : neṅgate sopamā smṛtā  
yogino yatacittasya : yuñjato yogam ātmanah*  
Like a lamp which remains safe and does not stir: that is the simile remembered for the *yogin*, whose thinking is controlled, who yokes the *yoga* of the self.
- 6:20 *yatroparamate cittam : niruddham yogasevayā  
yatra caivātmanā 'tmānam : paśyann ātmani tuṣyati*  
When thinking is quiet, suppressed by resorting to *yoga*, and when, seeing the self with the self, one is content in oneself,...
- 6:21 *sukham ātyantikam yat tad : buddhigrāhyam atīndriyam  
vetti yatra na caivāyam : sthitaś calati tattvataḥ*  
...when one knows that which is continuous happiness, which can be grasped by *buddhi* [despite being] beyond the power of the senses, and [when] one is secure, not really stirring,...
- 6:22 *yaṃ labdhvā cāparam lābham : manyate nādhikam tataḥ  
yasmīn sthito na duḥkhena : gurunāpi vicālyate*  
...and, having obtained the unbettered acquisition, considers it unexcelled, then one remains in it, not even caused to move by weighty sorrow.
- 6:23 *taṃ vidyād duḥkhasamyoga- : -viyogaṃ yogasamjñitam  
sa niścayena yuktavyo : yogo 'nirviññacetasa*  
One should know that unyoking-of-the-connection-with-sorrow to be called *yoga*. That *yoga* is resolutely to be yoked with undespairing mind.
- 6:24 *samkalpaprabhavan kāmāms : tyaktvā sarvān aśeṣataḥ  
manasaivendriyagrāmaṃ : viniyamya samantataḥ*  
One should abandon entirely all *samkalpa*-born desires, restrain the village of the senses completely with just the mind,...
- 6:25 *śanaiḥśanair uparamed : buddhyā dhṛtigrhītayā  
ātmasamstham manaḥ kṛtvā : na kiñcid api cintayet*  
...and gradually calm down by means of firmly-held *buddhi*. One should make the mind remain in oneself, and think of nothing at all.



- 6:26 *yato yato niṣcarati : manas cañcalam asthiram  
tatas tato niyamyaitad : ātmany eva vaśam nayet*  
Whenever the fickle, unsteady mind comes forth, one should restrain it and bring it under one's own control.
- 6:27 *praśāntamanasaṃ hy enaṃ : yoginaṃ sukham uttamam  
upaiti śāntarajasaṃ : brahmabhūtam akalmaṣam*  
Utter joy goes to the *yogin* whose mind has become calm, whose passions are quietened, who has become *brahman*, who is stainless.
- 6:28 *yuñjann evaṃ sadā 'tmānaṃ : yogī vigatakalmaṣaḥ  
sukhena brahmasaṃsparśam : atyantam sukham āsnute*  
Always yoking him- / herself in this manner, the *yogin*, whose stains are gone, easily attains contact with *brahman* and absolute happiness.
- 6:29 *sarvabhūtaṣṭham ātmānaṃ : sarvabhūtāni cātmani  
ikṣate yogayuktātmā : sarvatra samadarśanaḥ*  
The one whose self is yoked with *yoga*, who sees the same [thing] everywhere, sees the self resting in all creatures, and all creatures in the self.
- 6:30 *yo mām paśyati sarvatra : sarvaṃ ca mayi paśyati  
tasyāhaṃ na praṇaśyāmi : sa ca me na praṇaśyati*  
I am not lost to the one who sees me everywhere and sees everything in me, nor is that one lost to me.
- 6:31 *sarvabhūtaṣṭhitam yo mām : bhajaty ekatvam āsthitah  
sarvathā vartamāno 'pi : sa yogī mayi vartate*  
The one who experiences me as resting in all creatures, who has ascended to oneness, is a *yogin* and dwells in me, though acting in every way.
- 6:32 *ātmaupamyena sarvatra : samaṃ paśyati yo 'rjuna  
sukham vā yadi vā duḥkham : sa yogī paramo mataḥ*  
The one who, by comparison with their own self, sees the same thing everywhere, whether happiness or sorrow, is considered to be the most excellent *yogin*.
- 6:33 *yo 'yaṃ yogas tvayā proktaḥ : sāmyena madhusūdana  
etasyāhaṃ na paśyāmi : cañcalatvāt sthitim sthirām*  
[A:] Because of fickleness, I do not see that this *yoga*, which is pronounced by you as evenness, would remain stable.
- 6:34 *cañcalaṃ hi manaḥ kṛṣṇa : pramāthi balavad dṛḍham  
tasyāhaṃ nigrahaṃ manye : vāyor iva suduṣkaram*  
The mind is fickle, churning, powerful and mighty. I deem its restraint to be most arduous, like that of the wind.
- 6:35 *asaṃśayaṃ mahābāho : mano durnigrahaṃ calam  
abhyāseṇa tu kaunteya : vairāgyeṇa ca grhyate*  
[K:] Doubtless the mind is difficult to restrain, unsteady. Yet, by discipline and indifference, it is seized.
- 6:36 *asaṃyatātmanā yogo : duṣprāpa iti me matiḥ*

*vaśyātmanā tu yatatā : śakyo 'vāptum upāyataḥ*

My view is that, for one whose self is not controlled, *yoga* is hard to attain. But a self-willed striver is able to attain it somehow.

6:37 *ayatih śraddhayopeto : yogāc calitamānasah  
aprāpya yogasamsiddhim : kām gatim kṛṣṇa gacchati*  
[A:] A non-ascetic, entered into faith, whose mind departs from *yoga* before they reach the perfection of *yoga*: what goal do they arrive at?

6:38 *kaccin nobhayavibhraṣṭas : chinnābhram iva naśyati  
apraṭiṣṭho mahābāho : vimūḍho brahmaṇaḥ pathi*  
Are they not, fallen from both [*yoga* and its perfection], lost like a torn cloud, without foundation, confused on the path of *brahman*?

6:39 *etaṃ me saṃśayaṃ kṛṣṇa : chettum arhasy aśeṣataḥ  
tvadanyaḥ saṃśayasyāsya : chettā nahy upapadyate*  
You are able to remove this doubt for me completely, for, apart from you, no remover of this doubt is apparent.

6:40 *pārtha naiveha nāmutra : vināśas tasya vidyate  
na hi kalyāṇakṛt kaścid : durgatim tāta gacchati*  
[K:] Neither in this world nor in the other is their destruction found, for no doer of good comes to misfortune.

6:41 *prāpya puṇyakṛtām lokān : uṣitvā śāśvatih samāḥ  
sucinām śrīmatām gehe : yogabhraṣṭo 'bhijāyate*  
Having reached the worlds of the doers of good, having dwelt [there] for countless years, the one fallen from *yoga* is born again in the house of pure, fortunate folk...

6:42 *athavā yoginām eva : kule bhavati dhīmatām  
etad dhi durlabhataram : loke janma yad īdṛśam*  
...or they come into a family of wise *yogins*: indeed, this birth endowed with such qualities is rarer in the world.

6:43 *tatra taṃ buddhisamyogaṃ : labhate paurvadehikam  
yatate ca tato bhūyaḥ : saṃsiddhau kurunandana*  
There they find that *buddhi*-yoking of the old body, and thence they make for perfection once more.

6:44 *pūrvābhyāsenā tenaiva : hriyate hyavaśo 'pi saḥ  
jijñāsūr api yogasya : śabdabrahmātivartate*  
Even if unwishing, they are seized by that same former discipline. The one who is merely desirous of knowing *yoga* surpasses the sound-*brahman*...

6:45 *prayatnād yatamānas tu : yogī saṃsuddhakilbiṣaḥ  
anekajanmasamsiddhas : tato yāti parām gatim*  
...and the *yogin*, stains cleansed, striving from continued endeavour, whose perfection takes many births, then goes to the highest goal.

(...)

7:1 *mayi āsaktamanāḥ pārtha : yogaṃ yuñjan madāśrayaḥ*

*asaṃśayaṃ samagraṃ mām : yathā jñāsyasi tac chr̥ṇu*  
Hear how, mind fixed on me, yoking *yoga*, sheltering in me, you will know me completely, without doubt.

- 7:2 *jñānaṃ te 'haṃ savijñānam : idaṃ vakṣyāmy aśeṣataḥ*  
*yaj jñātvā neha bhūyo 'nyaj : jñātavyam avasiṣyate*  
I will utter for you, without remainder, this knowledge and understanding, knowing which, moreover, nothing else in the world remains to be known.
- 7:3 *manuṣyānāṃ sahasreṣu : kaścid yatati siddhaye*  
*yatatām api siddhānām : kaścin mām vetti tattvataḥ*  
One person in a thousand strives for success, and, of those successful striving ones, [only] one really knows me.
- 7:4 *bhūmir āpo 'nalo vāyuḥ : khaṃ mano buddhir eva ca*  
*ahaṃkāra itīyaṃ me : bhinnā prakṛtir aṣṭadhā*  
Earth, water, fire, wind, space, *manas*, *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra*: this is my *prakṛti* split eightfold.
- 7:5 *apareyam itas tv anyāṃ : prakṛtiṃ viddhi me parām*  
*jīvabhūtāṃ mahābāho : yayedam dhāryate jagat*  
This is the lower one, so know my other, higher *prakṛti*, consisting of life, by means of which this world is supported.
- 7:6 *etadyonīni bhūtāni : sarvāṅīty upadhāraya*  
*ahaṃ kṛtsnasya jagataḥ : prabhavaḥ pralayas tathā*  
Understand that all creatures have this as their source. I am the origin and also the destruction of the whole world.
- 7:7 *mattaḥ parataraṃ nānyat : kiñcid asti dhanañjaya*  
*mayi sarvam idaṃ protaṃ : sūtre maṇigaṇā iva*  
There is no other higher than me. All this is strung on me like pearls on a thread.
- 7:8 *raso 'haṃ apsu kaunteya : prabhāsmi śaśisūryayoḥ*  
*praṇavaḥ sarvavedeṣu : śabdaḥ khe pauruṣaṃ nṛṣu*  
I am the flavour in the waters, the light in the moon and sun, the 'om' in all the Vedas, the sound in space, the virility in men...
- 7:9 *punyo gandhaḥ pṛthivyām ca : tejaś cāsmi vibhāvasau*  
*jīvanaṃ sarvabhūteṣu : tapaś cāsmi tapasviṣu*  
...and I am the pleasant smell in the earth, the splendour in that which shines, the livelihood in all beings, and the austerity of the austere.
- 7:10 *bījaṃ mām sarvabhūtānām : viddhi pārtha sanātanam*  
*buddhir buddhimatām asmi : tejas tejasvinām ahaṃ*  
Know me to be the primeval seed of all beings: I am the *buddhi* of those possessing *buddhi*, the splendour of the splendid.
- 7:11 *balam balavatām asmi : kāmarāgavivarjitam*  
*dharmāviroddho bhūteṣu : kāmo 'smi bharatarābha*  
Of the strong I am the strength devoid of passion and desire. In all beings I am

the desire that does not oppose *dharma*.

7:12 *ye caiva sāttvikā bhāvā : rājasās tāmasās ca ye  
matta eveti tān viddhi : na tv ahaṃ teṣu te mayi*  
Whatever *sattvic*, *rajasic* and *tamasic* manners of being [there are], know these to be from me alone: but I am not in them, they are in me.

7:13 *tribhir guṇamayair bhāvair : ebhiḥ sarvam idaṃ jagat  
mohitaṃ nābhijānāti : mām ebhyaḥ param avyayam*  
This whole world, confused by these three conditions of being consisting of *guṇas*, does not recognise me, distinct from them [and] imperishable.

7:14 *daivī hy eṣā guṇamayī : mama māyā duratyayā  
mām eva ye prapadyante : māyām etāṃ taranti te*  
This celestial *māyā* of mine, consisting of *guṇas*, is inscrutable. Those who resort to me alone cross beyond this *māyā*.

(...)

7:15 *caturvidhā bhajante mām : janāḥ sukṛtino 'rjuna  
ārto jijñāsur arthārthī : jñānī ca bharatarṣabha*  
Four kinds of decent people honour me: the suffering one, the knowledge-seeker, the one whose purpose is profit, and the knower.

7:17 *teṣāṃ jñānī nityayukta : ekabhaktir viśiṣyate  
priyo hi jñānīno 'tyartham : ahaṃ sa ca mama priyaḥ*  
Of these the knower, ever-yoked, whose *bhakti* is exclusive, is preeminent. I am exceedingly dear to the knower; he / she is dear to me.

(...)

7:19 *bahūnām janmanām ante : jñānavān mām prapadyate  
vāsudevaḥ sarvam iti : sa mahātmā sudurlabhaḥ*  
At the end of many births the knowledgeable one attains to me. That great-spirited one, [thinking] 'Vāsudeva is everything', is very rare.

(...)

7:25 *nāhaṃ prakāśaḥ sarvasya : yogamāyāsamāvṛtaḥ  
mūdho 'yaṃ nābhijānāti : loko mām ajam avyayam*  
I am not visible to all, concealed by the *māyā* of [my] *yoga*. This confused world does not recognise me, unborn [and] imperishable.

7:26 *vedāhaṃ samatītāni : vartamānāni cārjuna  
bhaviṣyāni ca bhūtāni : mām tu veda na kaścana*  
I know beings past, present and future, but nobody knows me.

7:27 *icchādveṣasamutthena : dvandvamohena bhārata  
sarvabhūtāni sammohaṃ : sarge yānti paramtapa*  
By means of the delusion of the *dvandvas*, produced by enmity and desire, all beings in creation [or all beings at birth] go into confusion.

7:28 *yeṣāṃ tv antagataṃ pāpaṃ : janānām puṇyakarmaṇām  
te dvandvamohanirmuktā : bhajante mām dṛḍhavrataḥ*  
But those virtuously-acting folk whose wickedness (*pāpaṃ*) has come to an

end, freed from the delusion of the *dvandvas*, firm in their vows, share in me.

(...)

7:30

*sādhibhūtādhidaivaṃ mām : sādhiyajñam ca ye viduḥ  
prayānakāle 'pi ca mām : te vidur yuktacetasaḥ*

Those whose thinking is yoked and who, even in [their] hour of death, know me as containing that which pertains to matter, to the *devas* and to *yajña*, know [indeed].

(...)

8:3

*akṣaram brahma paramaṃ : svabhāvo 'dhyātmam ucyate  
bhūtabhāvodbhava-kara : visargaḥ karmasaṃjñitaḥ*

The highest *brahman* is the imperishable. *Svabhāva* is said to be that which pertains to *yajña*. The product generative of the conditions of creatures is termed *karman*.

(...)

8:5

*antakāle ca mām eva : smaran muktivā kalevaram  
yaḥ prayāti sa madbhāvaṃ : yāti nāsty atra saṃśayaḥ*

The one who, remembering just me in [their] hour of death, abandons the body and goes forth, certainly goes to my being.

8:6

*yaṃ yaṃ vāpi smaran bhāvaṃ : tyajaty ante kalevaram  
taṃ taṃ evaiti kaunteya : sadā tadbhāvabhāvitaḥ*

One goes to whatever condition of being one, in the end, abandons the body remembering: one is always made to become in that condition.

(...)

8:8

*abhyāsayogayuktena : cetasā nānyagāminā  
paramaṃ puruṣaṃ divyaṃ : yāti pārthānucintayan*

Thinking on the divine highest *puruṣa* with a mind which is yoked by the habit of *yoga* and which does not stray to another, one goes [to that divine highest *puruṣa*].

8:9

*kaviṃ purāṇam anuśāsītāram : aṅor aṅtyāṃsam anusmared yaḥ  
sarvasya dhātāram acintyarūpam : ādityavarṇaṃ tamaśaḥ parastāt  
[see next verse]*

8:10

*prayānakāle manasā 'calena : bhaktyā yukto yogabalena caiva  
bhruvor madhye prāṇam āveśya samyak : sa taṃ paraṃ puruṣam upaiti  
divyaṃ*

The ancient governor-sage, more minute than the minute, *dhātr* of all, of unthinkable form, the colour of the sun beyond the darkness: the one who thinks about this one in [their] hour of death with unwavering, devoted mind, yoked with the forces of *yoga*, delivering the entire breath between the eyebrows, attains to that divine highest *puruṣa*.

(...)

8:13

*om ity ekākṣaram brahma : vyāharan mām anusmaran  
yaḥ prayāti tyajan dehaṃ : sa yāti paramām gatim*

The one who, uttering 'om', *brahman*-in-one-syllable, goes forth, relinquishing the body while thinking of me, goes the highest course.

- (...)  
8:15 *mām upetya punarjanma : duḥkhālayam aśāśvatam  
nāpnuvanti mahātmānaḥ : saṁsiddhiṁ paramām gatāḥ*  
The great-spirited ones ascend to me and do not obtain rebirth, the  
impermanent dwelling of sorrow: they go to highest perfection.
- (...)  
8:17 *sahasrayugaparyantam : ahar yad brahmaṇo viduḥ  
rātriṁ yugasahasrāntām : te 'horātravida janāḥ*  
Those folk who know day and night know that a day of Brahmā ends after  
1000 yugas: a night [of Brahmā] ends after 1000 yugas.
- 8:18 *avyaktād vyaktayaḥ sarvāḥ : prabhavanty aharāgame  
rātryāgame pralīyante : tatraivāvyaktasaṁjñake*  
All manifestations arise from the unmanifest at break of day: at nightfall they  
are dissolved into that same so-called unmanifest.
- 8:19 *bhūtagrāmaḥ sa evāyam : bhūtvā bhūtvā pralīyate  
rātryāgame 'vaṣaḥ pārtha : prabhavaty aharāgame*  
This same village of creatures, having arisen again and again, disappears at  
nightfall without wishing to, [and] arises at daybreak.
- 8:20 *paras tasmāt tu bhāvo 'nyo : 'vyakto 'vyaktāt sanātanaḥ  
yaḥ sa sarveṣu bhūteṣu : naśyatsu na vinaśyati*  
And so [there is] a higher eternal unmanifest state other than the unmanifest,  
which, while all beings perish, does not perish.
- 8:21 *avyakto 'kṣara ity uktas : tam āhuḥ paramām gatim  
yaṁ prāpya na nivartante : tad dhāma paramaṁ mama*  
The unmanifest is said to be imperishable. They say it is the highest course,  
that highest abode of mine, having obtained which they do not return.
- 8:22 *puruṣaḥ sa paraḥ pārtha : bhaktyā labhyas tv ananyayā  
yasyāntaḥsthāni bhūtāni : yena sarvam idaṁ tatam*  
That highest *puruṣa*, within whom creatures rest, by whom all this is extended,  
is obtainable by exclusive *bhakti*.
- 8:23 *yatra kāle tv anāvṛttim : āvṛttim caiva yoginaḥ  
prayātā yānti taṁ kālam : vakṣyāmi bharatarṣabha*  
I will pronounce that time dying in which *yogins* go to the non-returning and  
the returning.
- 8:24 *agnir jyotir ahaḥ śuklaḥ : ṣaṅmāsā uttarāyaṇam  
tatra prayātā gacchanti : brahma brahmavido janāḥ*  
Fire, light, day, the bright fortnight, the [sun's] six-month progress north:  
*brahman*-knowing folk dying there go to *brahman*.
- 8:25 *dhūmo rātris tathā kṛṣṇaḥ : ṣaṅmāsā dakṣiṇāyaṇam  
tatra cāndramasaṁ jyotir : yogī prāpya nivartate*  
Smoke, night, the dark fortnight, the [sun's] six-month progress south: [dying]  
there, having obtained the lunar light, the *yogin* returns.

- 8:26 *śuklakṛṣṇe gatī hy ete : jagataḥ śāśvate mate*  
*ekayā yāty anāvṛttim : anyayāvartate punaḥ*  
 These, the bright and the dark, are considered to be the two eternal courses of the world. By means of one, one goes, not to return. By means of the other, one returns again.
- 8:27 *naite sṛtī pārtha jānan : yogī muhyati kaścana*  
*tasmāt sarveṣu kāleṣu : yogayukto bhavārjuna*  
 Knowing these two paths, the *yogin* is not confused: so become yoked with *yoga* at all times.
- 8:28 *vedeṣu yajñeṣu tapassu caiva : dāneṣu yat puṇyaphalaṃ pradīṣṭam*  
*atyeti tat sarvaṃ idaṃ viditvā : yogī paraṃ sthānam upaiti cādyam*  
 The *yogin*, knowing all this, goes beyond whatever fruit of good works is indicated in the Vedas with respect to *yajñas*, austerities and gifts, and ascends to the highest, primeval state.
- 9:1 *idaṃ tu te guhyatamaṃ : pravakṣyāmy anasūyave*  
*jñānaṃ vijñānasahitaṃ : yaj jñātvā mokṣyase 'śubhāt*  
 I will pronounce this most hidden thing for unspiteful you: the knowledge, knowing which you will be freed from harm.
- (...)
- 9:3 *aśraddadhānāḥ puruṣā : dharmasyāśya parantapa*  
*aprāpya mām nivartante : mṛtyusamsāravartmani*  
 People holding no faith in this *dharma* do not attain to me: they return to the path of death and *samsāra*.
- 9:4 *mayā tatam idaṃ sarvaṃ : jagad avyaktamūrtinā*  
*matsthāni sarvabhūtāni : na cāhaṃ teṣv avasthitaḥ*  
 All this world is extended by me, [my] form unmanifest [or in the form of the unmanifest]. All beings are based on me, I am not based in them.
- 9:5 *na ca matsthāni bhūtāni : paśya me yogam aiśvaram*  
*bhūtabhṛn na ca bhūtaṣṭho : mamātmā bhūtabhāvanah*  
 But the beings are not based on me: see my Lordly *yoga*! My self is the bearer of beings: it is not based on the beings, it causes the beings to become.
- (...)
- 9:7 *sarvabhūtāni kaunteya : prakṛtiṃ yānti māmikām*  
*kalpakṣaye punas tāni : kalpādau visṛjāmy aham*  
 All beings go to my *prakṛti* at the quietening of the *kalpa*: I emit them again at the beginning of the *kalpa*.
- 9:8 *prakṛtiṃ svām avaṣṭabhya : visṛjāmi punaḥ punaḥ*  
*bhūtagrāmam imaṃ kṛtsnam : avaśaṃ prakṛter vaśāt*  
 Having recourse to my own *prakṛti*, I emit again and again this entire village of creatures unwisely, controlled by [my] nature.
- 9:9 *na ca mām tāni karmāni : nibadhnanti dhanañjaya*  
*udāsīnavad āsīnam : asaktaṃ teṣu karmasu*

But those acts do not bind me, seated unattached and indifferently in them.

9:10 *mayādhyakṣeṇa prakṛtiḥ : sūyate sacarācaram*  
*hetunānena kaunteya : jagad viparivartate*  
Prakṛti produces the moving and the unmoving by my supervision: for this reason the world revolves.

(...)

9:16 *ahaṃ kratur ahaṃ yajñāḥ : svadhāham ahaṃ auśadham*  
*mantra 'ham ahaṃ evājyam : ahaṃ agnir ahaṃ hutam*  
I am the rite, I am the *yajña*, I am the libation to the ancestors, I am the herb, I am the mantra, I am the ghee, I am the fire, I am the oblation.

(...)

9:18 *gatir bhartā prabhuh sākṣī : nivāsaḥ śaraṇaṃ suhṛt*  
*prabhavaḥ pralayaḥ sthānaṃ : nidhānaṃ bījam avyayam*  
[I am] the way, the bearer, the master, the witness, the abode, the refuge, the friend, the origin, the destruction, the station, the receptacle, the imperishable seed.

(...)

9:20 *traividya māṃ somapāḥ pūtapāpāḥ : yajñair iṣṭvā svargatiṃ prārthayante*  
*te puṇyam āsādyā surendralokam : aśnanti divyān divi devabhogān*  
The *soma*-drinkers who are familiar with the knowledge of the three Vedas, their sins (*pāpas*) purified, seek me by means of *yajñas* and long for the way to heaven. Having reached the auspicious world of the chief of the *devas*, they enjoy, in the sky, the celestial enjoyments of the *devas*.

9:21 *te taṃ bhuktvā svargalokaṃ viśālam : kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokaṃ viśanti*  
*evam trayīdharmam anuprapannāḥ : gatāgataṃ kāmakāmā labhante*  
Having enjoyed the extensive world of heaven, their merit being expended, they enter the world of mortals. Thus, following the *dharma* enjoined in the three Vedas, desiring pleasures, they obtain that which comes and goes.

9:22 *ananyāś cintayanto māṃ : ye janāḥ paryupāsate*  
*teṣāṃ nityābhiyuktānāṃ : yogakṣemaṃ vahāmy aham*  
For those folk who think exclusively of me, abide [in me] and are always diligent, I bestow security of *yoga*.

9:23 *ye 'py anyadevatābhaktā : yajante śraddhayānvitāḥ*  
*te 'pi māṃ eva kaunteya : yajanty avidhipūrvakam*  
Even those who, sharing with other deities, make offerings accompanied by faith, they too offer to me, [but] not according to the injunctions.

9:24 *ahaṃ hi sarvayajñānāṃ : bhoktā ca prabhur eva ca*  
*na tu māṃ abhijānanti : tattvenātaś cyavanti te*  
I am the enjoyer and the master of all *yajñas*, but they do not know me truly, hence they fall [back to rebirth].

(...)

9:26 *patraṃ puṣpaṃ phalaṃ toyam : yo me bhaktyā prayacchati*  
*tad ahaṃ bhaktyupahṛtam : aśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ*  
I consume that *bhakti*-offering of the dutifully-spirited one who offers me, by



means of *bhakti*, a feather, a flower, a fruit [or] some water.

- 9:27 *yat karoṣi yad aśnāsi : yaj juhoṣi dadāsi yat*  
*yat tapasyasi kaunteya : tat kuruṣva madarpanam*  
What[ever] you do, enjoy, invoke, give [or] undergo by way of austerity, make it an offering to me.
- 9:28 *śubhāśubhaphalair evaṃ : mokṣyase karmabandhanair*  
*saṃnyāsayogayuktātmā : vimukto mām upaiśyasi*  
Thus you will be freed from good and bad fruits [and] from the bonds of action. [Your] self yoked with the *yoga* of renunciation, freed, you will ascend to me.
- 9:29 *samo 'haṃ sarvabhūteṣu : na me dveṣyo 'sti na priyaḥ*  
*ye bhajanti tu mām bhaktyā : mayi te teṣu cāpy aham*  
I am the same with respect to all beings: they are, to me, neither odious nor dear. But those who share with me by means of *bhakti* are in me, and I in them.
- (...)
- 9:32 *mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya : ye 'pi syuḥ pāpayonayah*  
*striyo vaiśyās tathā śūdrās : te 'pi yānti parām gatim*  
Those who have recourse to me, even be they of wretched origin, women, *vaiśyas* or *śūdras*, go the highest course.
- (...)
- 10:2 *na me viduḥ suragaṇāḥ : prabhavaṃ na maharṣayah*  
*aham ādir hi devānām : maharṣṇām ca sarvaśaḥ*  
Neither the multitudes of the celestial ones nor the great *ṛṣis* knew my origin. I am the beginning of the *devas* and the great *ṛṣis* collectively.
- 10:3 *yo mām ajam anādiṃ ca : vetti lokamaheśvaram*  
*asammūdhah sa martyeṣu : sarvapāpaiḥ pramucyate*  
The one who knows me as the unborn and beginningless great Lord of worlds, unconfused amongst mortals, is freed from all evils (*pāpas*).
- (...)
- 10:6 *maharṣayah sapta pūrve : catvāro manavas tathā*  
*madbhāvā mānasā jātā : yeṣāṃ loka imāḥ prajāḥ*  
The seven great *ṛṣis* of old and the four Manus, whose world and creatures [these are], are of my being, born of [my] mind.
- (...)
- 10:20 *aham ātmā gudākeśa : sarvabhūtāśayasthitaḥ*  
*aham ādiś ca madhyaṃ ca : bhūtānām anta eva ca*  
I am the self resting in the seat of all beings; I am the beginning, middle and end of the beings.
- 10:21 *ādityānām ahaṃ viṣṇur : jyotiṣāṃ ravir aṃśumān*  
*marīcīr marutām asmī : nakṣatrāṇām ahaṃ śaśī*  
I am the Viṣṇu of the Ādityas, the beaming sun among heavenly bodies, the Marīci of the Maruts, the moon among stars.

- 10:22 *vedānām sāmavedo 'smi : devānām asmi vāsavaḥ  
indriyānām manaś cāsmi : bhūtānām asmi cetanā*  
I am the *Sāmaveda* among Vedas, Indra among the *devas*, *manas* among the *indriyas*, the consciousness of beings.
- 10:23 *rudrānām śaṅkaraś cāsmi : vitteśo yakṣarākṣasām  
vasūnām pāvakaś cāsmi : meruḥ śikhariṇām aham*  
I am the Śiva of the Rudras, the Kubera of the Yakṣas and Rakṣas, the Pāvaka of the Vasus, Meru among mountains.
- 10:24 *purodhasām ca mukhyaṃ mām : viddhi pārtha bṛhaspatim  
senānīnām ahaṃ skandaḥ : sarasām asmi sā garaḥ*  
Know me to be Bṛhaspati, the chief of domestic priests; I am Skanda among commanders, the ocean among waters.
- 10:25 *maharṣīnām bhṛgur ahaṃ : girām asmy ekam akṣaram  
yajñānām japayajño 'smi : sthāvarānām himālayaḥ*  
I am Bhṛgu among the great ṛṣis, the one syllable (*om*) among invocations, the *japayajña* among *yajñas*, the Himālaya among immovables.
- 10:26 *aśvatthaḥ sarvavrkṣānām : devarṣīnām ca nāradaḥ  
gandharvānām citrarathaḥ : siddhānām kapilo muniḥ*  
[I am] the Aśvattha among trees, Nārada among *devas* and ṛṣis, the Citraratha of the Gandharvas, the *muni* Kapila among perfected ones.
- 10:27 *uccaiḥśravasam aśvānām : viddhi mām amṛtodbhavam  
airāvataṃ gajendrānām : narānām ca narādhipam*  
Know me to be Uccaiḥśravas, arisen from the deathless, among horses, Airāvata among great elephants, the protector-of-folk among folk.
- 10:28 *āyudhānām ahaṃ vajraṃ : dhenūnām asmi kāmadhuk  
prajānaś cāsmi kandarpaḥ : sarpānām asmi vāsukiḥ*  
I am the *vajra* among weapons, the 'desire-granter' among cows. I am Kāma the progenitor; I am Vāsuki among serpents.
- 10:29 *anantaś cāsmi nāgānām : varuṇo yādasām aham  
pitṛṇām aryamā cāsmi : yamaḥ saṃyamātām aham*  
I am the Śeṣa of the Nāgas, Varuṇa among sea creatures, Aryaman among the ancestors, Yama among those that restrain.
- 10:30 *prahlādaś cāsmi daityānām : kālaḥ kalayatām aham  
mṛgānām ca mṛgendro 'ham : vainateyaś ca pakṣīnām*  
I am the Prahlāda of the Daityas, *kāla* among those that push on, the chief-of-beasts among beasts, Garuda among the winged ones.
- 10:31 *pavanaḥ pavatām asmi : rāmaḥ śastrabhṛtām aham  
jhaṣānām makaraś cāsmi : srotasām asmi jāhnavī*  
I am the wind among purifiers, Rāma among sword-bearers, Makara among fish, the Ganges among rivers.
- 10:32 *sargānām ādirantaś ca : madhyaṃ caivāham arjuna  
adhyātmavidyā vidyānām : vādaḥ pravadatām aham*

- I am the beginning, end and middle of the emissions, the *adhyātman*-knowledge among knowledges, the speech of those that speak.
- 10:33 *akṣarāṇām akāro 'smi : dvandvaḥ sāmāsikasya ca aham evākṣayaḥ kālo : dhātāhaṃ viśvatomukhaḥ*  
I am 'a' among syllables, the *dvandva* among grammatical compounds; indeed, I am the imperishable, *kāla*, *dhātr*, facing everywhere.
- 10:34 *mṛtyuḥ sarvahaṛāś cāham : udbhavaś ca bhaviṣyatām kīrtiḥ śrīr vāk ca nārīṇām : smṛtir medhā dhṛtiḥ kṣamā*  
I am the death which takes all, the arising of future beings, the fame, splendour, speech, memory, nous, constancy and patience of women.
- 10:35 *bṛhatsāma tathā sāmṇām : gāyatrī chandasām aham māsānām mārḡasīrṣo 'ham : ṛtūnām kusamākaraḥ*  
I am also the great-chant among chants, the *gāyatrī* among metres, *Mārḡasīras* among the months, among seasons the one that makes flowers.
- 10:36 *dyūtaṃ chalayatām asmi : tejas tejasvinām aham jayo 'smi vyavasāyo 'smi : sattvaṃ sattvavatām aham*  
I am the gambling of those that outwit, the splendour of the splendid; I am victory, I am resolve, I am the purity of the pure.
- 10:37 *vṛṣṇīnām vāsudevo 'smi : pāṇḍavānām dhanañjayāḥ munīnām apy ahaṃ vyāsaḥ : kavīnām uśanā kavīḥ*  
I am the *Vāsudeva* of the *Vṛṣṇis*, the *Arjuna* of the *Pāṇḍavas*, *Vyāsa* among *munis*, *kavi* *Uśanas* among *kavis*.
- 10:38 *daṇḍo damayatām asmi : nūtir asmi jigīṣatām maunam caivāsmi guhyānām : jñānam jñānavatām aham*  
I am the rod of those that conquer, the *nūti* of those desiring to win, the silence of the mysterious ones, the knowledge of the knowers.
- (...)
- 11:5 *paśya me pārtha rūpāṇi : śataśo 'tha sahasraśaḥ nānāvidhāni divyāni : nānāvarṇākṛtīni ca*  
Behold my forms in [their] hundreds and thousands, multifarious, celestial, of various colours and shapes.
- 11:6 *paśyādityān vasūn rudrān : aśvinau marutas tathā bahūny adṛṣṭapūrvāṇi : paśyāścaryāṇi bhārata*  
Behold the *Ādityas*, *Vāsus*, *Rudras*, the two *Aśvins* and the *Maruts*. Behold many marvels never seen before.
- 11:7 *ihaikasthaṃ jagat kṛtsnam : paśyādya sacarācaram mama dehe guḍākeśa : yac cānyad dṛṣṭum icchasi*  
Behold the entire world assembled, the moving and the unmoving, and what[ever] else you want to see, here and now in my body.
- 11:8 *na tu mām śakyase draṣṭum : anenaiva svacakṣuṣā divyaṃ dadāmi te cakṣuḥ : paśya me yogam aiśvaram*  
But you cannot see me with this sight of yours. I give you celestial sight:

behold my Lordly *yoga*!

- 11:9 *evam uktvā tato rājan : mahāyogeśvaro hariḥ*  
*darśayām āsa pārthāya : paramam rūpam aiśvaram*  
Having said this, [Kṛṣṇa], the great Lord of *yoga*, showed [his] highest Lordly form for [Arjuna]:
- 11:10 *anekavaktranayanam : anekādbhutadarśanam*  
*anekadivyaḥbharanam : divyānekodyatāyudham*  
Many-mouthed, many-eyed, with many marvellous sights, many celestial ornaments and many upraised celestial weapons.
- 11:11 *divyamālyāambaradharam : divyagandhānulepanam*  
*sarvāścaryamayam devam : anantaṁ viśvatomukham*  
Bearing celestial wreaths and garlands, with celestial odours and unguents, with all marvels, celestial, endless, facing everywhere.
- 11:12 *divi sūryasahasrasya : bhaved yugapad utthitā*  
*yadi bhāḥ sadṛṣṭī sā syād : bhāsas tasya mahātmanaḥ*  
If the risen light of a thousand suns were to occur together, that would resemble the light of the great-spirited one.
- 11:13 *tatraikastham jagat kṛtsnam : pravibhaktam anekadhā*  
*apaśyad devadevasya : śarīre pāṇḍavas tadā*  
Then [Arjuna] saw the entire world, variously divided, assembled there in the body of the *deva* of *devas*.
- 11:14 *tataḥ sa vismayāviṣṭo : hr̥ṣṭaromā dhanañjayah*  
*praṇamya śirasā devam : kṛtāñjalir abhāṣata*  
Then [Arjuna], full of perplexity, his hair standing on end, bowed his head to the celestial one, made the sign of joined hands, and said:
- 11:15 *paśyāmi devāṃs tava deva dehe : sarvāṃs tathā bhūtavīśeṣasaṃghān*  
*brahmāṇam īsam kamalāsanastham : ṛṣiṃś ca sarvān uragāṃś ca divyān*  
I see, in your body, *devas* and all collections of kinds of beings, and Lord Brahmā resting on a lotus seat, and all *ṛṣis* and celestial snakes.
- 11:16 *anekabāhūdaravaktranetraṃ : paśyāmi tvāṃ sarvato 'nantarūpam*  
*nāntam na madhyam na punas tavādiṃ : paśyāmi viśveśvara viśvarūpa*  
Many-armed, -bellied, -mouthed and -eyed, I see you, whose form is endless, everywhere. Neither end, nor middle, nor even beginning of you do I see.
- 11:17 *kirīṭinaṃ gadinam cakriṇam ca : tejorāśim sarvato dīptimantam*  
*paśyāmi tvāṃ durnirīkṣyam samantād : dīptānalārkadyutim aprameyam*  
I see you, with diadem, club and discus, a pile of splendour, bright everywhere, difficult to see completely, with the lustre of the bright fire and the sun, unfathomable.
- 11:18 *tvam akṣaram paramam veditavyam : tvam asya viśvasya param nidhānam*  
*tvam avyayah śāśvatadharmagoptā : sanātanas tvam puruṣo mato me*  
You are to be known as the highest imperishable; you are the highest receptacle of all this; you are the undecaying, the constant preserver of

*dharmā*; I consider you to be the eternal *puruṣa*.

- 11:19 *anādimadhyāntam anantavīryam : anantabāhuṃ śaśisūryanetrām paśyāmi tvāṃ dīptahutāśavaktraṃ : svatejasā viśvam idam tāpantam*  
I see you, without beginning, middle or end, of endless heroism, endless strength, moon- and sun-eyed, your mouth a bright fire, burning all this with your splendour.
- 11:20 *dyāvāprthivyor idam antaram hi : vyāptaṃ tvayaikena diśas ca sarvāḥ dr̥ṣṭvādbhutam rūpam ugraṃ tavedaṃ : lokatrayam pravyathitam mahātman*  
This intermediate region between sky and earth, and all the directions, are pervaded only by you. The three worlds see this terrible, marvellous form of yours and quake.
- 11:21 *amī hi tvāṃ surasaṃghā viśanti : kecid bhītāḥ prāñjalayo gr̥ṇanti svastīty uktvā mahar̥ṣisiddhasaṃghāḥ : stuvanti tvāṃ stutibhiḥ puṣkalābhiḥ*  
Those companies of deities enter you: some, afraid, holding out open hands, sing. Saying 'hail!', the assemblies of great *ṛṣis* and perfected ones praise you with copious eulogies.
- 11:22 *rudrādityā vasavo ye ca sādhyā : viśve 'śvinau marutaś coṣmapās ca gandharvayakṣāsurasiddhasaṃghā : vīkṣante tvāṃ vismitās caiva sarve*  
The Rudras and Ādityas, Vasus and Sādhyas, the Aśvins, all the Maruts and the Ūṣmapas, and the assembly of Gandharvas, Yakṣas, *asuras* and perfected ones regard you and are all astonished.
- 11:23 *rūpaṃ mahat te bahuvaktranetraṃ : mahābāho bahubāhūrupadam bahūdaram bahudamṣṭrākarālam : dr̥ṣṭvā lokāḥ pravyathitās tathāham*  
Seeing your great form with many mouths and eyes, many broad arms and feet, many bellies and many gaping fangs, the worlds are distressed, and I am too.
- 11:24 *nabhaḥspr̥ṣam dīptam anekavarṇam : vyāttānanam dīptaviśālanetraṃ dr̥ṣṭvā hi tvāṃ pravyathitāntarātmā : dhṛtiṃ na vindāmi śamaṃ ca viśno*  
Seeing you touching the sky, splendid, multicoloured, open-mouthed, with large blazing eyes, I find neither constancy nor calmness, [my] heart distressed.
- 11:25 *damṣṭrākarālāni ca te mukhāni : dr̥ṣṭvaiva kālānalasaṃnibhāni diśo na jāne na labhe ca śarma : prasīda deveśa jagannivāsa*  
Seeing your mouth gaping with teeth like the fire of time, I do not know the directions and find no safety. Be gracious, world-dwelling Lord of *devas*!
- 11:26 *amī ca tvāṃ dhṛtarāṣṭrasya putrāḥ : sarve sahaivāvanipālasaṃghaiḥ bhīṣmo dronaḥ sūtaputras tathāsau : sahāsmadīyair api yodhamukhyaiḥ*  
And all those sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, together with the assemblies of kings, Bhīṣma, Droṇa, [Karna] and our best warriors...
- 11:27 *vaktrāni te tvaramānā viśanti : damṣṭrākarālāni bhayānakāni kecid vilagnā daśanāntareṣu : samdr̥ṣyante cūrṇitair uttamāṅgaiḥ*  
...enter you, hastening to your dreadful tusk-gaping mouths: some, stuck between teeth, are seen with pulverised heads.
- 11:28 *yathā nadīnāṃ bahavo 'mbuvegāḥ : samudram evābhimukhā dravanti*

*tathā tavāmī naralokavīrā : viśanti vaktrāṇy abhivijvalanti*  
Just as the many water-currents of the rivers run towards the ocean, so do those heroes of the human world enter your blazing mouths.

- 11:29 *yathā pradīptaṃ jvalanaṃ patāṅgā : viśanti nāśāya samṛddhavegāḥ*  
*tathaiva nāśāya viśanti lokās : tavāpi vaktrāṇi samṛddhavegāḥ*  
Just as flying things go accelerating to destruction in the fire, so do the worlds go accelerating to destruction in your mouths.
- 11:30 *lelihyase grasamānaḥ samantāl : lokān samagrān vadanair jvaladbhiḥ*  
*tejobhir āpūrya jagat samagram : bhāsas tavogrāḥ pratapanti viṣṇo*  
You lick up all the worlds with flaming mouths, devouring them completely: having filled the whole world with brilliance, your savage rays burn it up.
- 11:31 *ākhyāhi me ko bhavān ugrarūpo : namo 'stu te devavara prasīda*  
*vijñātum icchāmi bhavantam ādyaṃ : na hi prajānāmi tava pravṛttim*  
Tell me, who are you whose form is terrible? Homage to you: be gracious! I want to understand you, the primeval one, for I do not comprehend your progress.
- 11:32 *kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho : lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ*  
*ṛte 'pi tvāṃ na bhaviṣyanti sarve : ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyānīkeṣu yodhāḥ*  
[K:] I am swollen time, destroyer of the worlds, turned forth here to crush the worlds. All the warriors who are stood in the opposed armies will not survive, even without you [or except for you].
- 11:33 *tasmāt tvam uttiṣṭha yaśo labhasva : jitvā śatrūn bhunṅṣva rājyaṃ samṛddham*  
*mayaivaitē nihatāḥ pūrvam eva : nimittamātraṃ bhava savyasācin*  
So stand up! Obtain fame! Conquer the enemy and enjoy prosperous kingship! These were killed by me previously: be the instrumental cause.
- 11:34 *dronaṃ ca bhīṣmaṃ ca jayadrathaṃ ca : karṇaṃ tathānyān api yodhavīrān*  
*mayā hatāms tvam jahi mā vyathīṣṭhā : yudhyasva jetāsi raṇe sapatnān*  
Droṇa and Bhīṣma and Jayadratha and Karṇa and the other warrior-heroes too: kill those killed by me! Do not waver! Fight! You will conquer [your] adversaries in the battle.
- 11:35 *etac chrutvā vacanaṃ keśavasya : kṛtāñjalir vepamānaḥ kirīṭī*  
*namaskṛtvā bhūya evāha kṛṣṇaṃ : sagadgadaṃ bhūtabhūtaḥ pranamya*  
Having heard this speech of [Kṛṣṇa's], [Arjuna], with joined hands, trembling, paid homage again, bowed, and, stammering and frightened, said to Kṛṣṇa:
- 11:36 *sthāne hr̥ṣīkeśa tava prakīrtyā : jagat prahr̥ṣyaty anurajyate ca*  
*rakṣāṃsi bhūtāni diśo dravanti : sarve namasyanti ca siddhasamghāḥ*  
At your announcement, the world justly rejoices and becomes devoted. Frightened fiends run to [all] quarters, and all the assemblies of perfected ones pay homage.
- 11:37 *kasmāc ca te na nameran mahātman : garīyase brahmaṇo 'py ādikartre*  
*ananta deveśa jagannivāsa : tvam akṣaram sad asat tatparam yat*  
And why would they not bow to you, the beginning-maker, more important even than *brahman*? Endless, world-residing lord of *devas*, you [are] the

imperishable, the *sat*, the *asat*, [and] whatever's beyond them.

- 11:38 *tvam ādidevaḥ puruṣaḥ purāṇas : tvam asya viśvasya paraṃ nidhānam  
vettāsi vedyam ca paraṃ ca dhāma : tvayā tataṃ viśvam anāntarūpa*  
You are the first *deva*, the ancient *puruṣa*; you are the utmost receptacle of all  
this. You are the knower and that which is to be known, and the highest abode.  
All is extended by you.
- 11:39 *vāyur yamo 'gnir varuṇaḥ śasāṅkaḥ : prajāpatis tvam prapitāmahaś ca  
namo namas te 'stu sahasrakṛtvah : punaś ca bhūyo 'pi namo namas te*  
You are Vāyu, Yama, Agni, Varuṇa, the moon, Prajāpati and the paternal  
great-grandfather [*i.e.* Brahmā]. May there be homage, homage to you a  
thousand times, homage again and homage to you yet again.
- 11:40 *namaḥ purastād atha pṛṣṭhatas te : namo 'stu te sarvata eva sarva  
anantavīryāmitavikramas tvam : sarvaṃ samāpnoṣi tato 'si sarvaḥ*  
May there be homage to you from the front and from behind, homage to you  
from every single side. You are the one of endless valour and unmeasured  
stride: you complete all, so you are all.
- 11:41 *sakheti matvā prasabham yad uktaṃ : he kṛṣṇa he yādava he sakheti  
ajānatā mahimānaṃ tavedam : mayā pramādāt praṇayena vāpi*  
'Friend': that [word has been] importunately thought and spoken. 'Oh Kṛṣṇa,  
oh Yādava, oh friend': this [was spoken] by me ignorant of your greatness, out  
of carelessness or affection.
- 11:42 *yac cāvahāsārtham asatkṛto 'si : vihāraśayyāsanabhojaneṣu  
eko 'tha vāpy acyuta tatsamakṣam : tat kṣāmaye tvām aham aprameyam*  
And when you are badly treated for the sake of a joke, in sports, on sofas, on  
seats and when eating, alone or in their sight, I ask immeasurable you to  
forgive it.
- 11:43 *pitāsi lokasya carācarasya : tvam asya pūjyaś ca gurur garīyān  
na tvatsamo 'sty abhyadhikaḥ kuto 'nyo : lokatraye 'py apratimaprabhāva*  
You are the father of the moving and unmoving world, and its most honourable  
*guru*. There is no one equal to you: how [then could there be] another more  
excellent in all the triple world?
- 11:44 *tasmāt praṇamya praṇidhāya kāyaṃ : prasādaye tvām aham īsam īdyam  
piteva putrasya sakheva sakhyuh : priyaḥ priyāyārhasi deva soḍhum*  
So I bow, lay down [my] body and appease you, the praiseworthy Lord. Like a  
father with a child, like a friend with a friend, a lover with the beloved, you  
should be patient.
- 11:45 *adr̥ṣṭapūrvam hṛṣito 'smi dr̥ṣṭvā : bhayena ca pravyathitaṃ mano me  
tad eva me darśaya deva rūpaṃ : prasāda deveśa jagannivāsa*  
Having seen that which has never before been seen, I am bristling with fear and  
my mind is distressed. Make me see the same [*i.e.* old] form: be gracious,  
world-dwelling Lord of *devas*.
- 11:46 *kirīṭinaṃ gadināṃ cakrahastam : icchāmi tvāṃ draṣṭum aham tathaiva  
tenaiva rūpeṇa caturbhujena : sahasrabāho bhava viśvamūrte*

I want to see you thus, diademed, with a club, with discus in hand. Thousand-armed one consisting of all, be of that four-armed form.

- 11:47 *mayā prasannena tavārjunedaṃ : rūpaṃ paraṃ darśitam ātmayogāt  
tejomayaṃ viśvaṃ anantaṃ ādyaṃ : yan me tvadanyena na dr̥ṣṭapūrvam*  
[K:] Arjuna, this highest form, brilliant, complete, endless [and]  
unprecedented, which has never before been seen by anyone other than my  
you, has been shown for you, by gracious me, through [my] own *yoga*.
- 11:48 *na vedayajñādhyayanair na dānair : na ca kriyābhir na tapobhir ugraiḥ  
evamrūpaḥ śakya ahaṃ nṛloke : draṣṭuṃ tvadanyena kurupravīra*  
Not by Vedic *yajña* or study, not by gifts nor by rites nor by severe austerities  
can I be seen in the human world in such a form by anyone other than you.
- 11:49 *mā te vyathā mā ca vimūḍhabhāvo : dr̥ṣtvā rūpaṃ ghoram īdr̥ṇi mamedam  
vyapetabhīḥ prītamanāḥ punas tvaṃ : tad eva me rūpaṃ idaṃ prapaśya*  
Having seen the terrible form endowed with such qualities, [may there be] no  
alarm for you and no state of confusion. [May] you [be] free from fear and glad  
in mind once more: behold this, my same [*i.e.* old] form.
- (...)
- 12:1 *evam satatayuktā ye : bhaktās tvāṃ paryupāsate  
ye cāpy akṣaram avyaktaṃ : teṣāṃ ke yogavittamāḥ*  
[A:] The ever-yoked *bhaktas* who partake of you, and those [who partake of]  
the imperishable unmanifest: which of these are the superlative *yoga*-knowers?
- 12:2 *mayy āveśya mano ye mām : nityayuktā upāsate  
śraddhayā parayopetās : te me yuktatamā matāḥ*  
[K:] Those are considered by me to be the superlatively yoked who, having  
caused the mind to reach me, ever-yoked, enter into me, ascending by means of  
utmost faith.
- 12:3 *ye tv akṣaram anirdeśyam : avyaktaṃ paryupāsate  
sarvatragam acintyaṃ ca : kūṭastham acalaṃ dhruvam*  
But those who partake of the imperishable, indefinable, unmanifest,  
omnipresent and ineffable, apex-resting, unmoving, constant [one]...
- 12:4 *saṃniyamendriyagrāmaṃ : sarvatra samabuddhayaḥ  
te prāpnuvanti mām eva : sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*  
...having restrained the village of the senses, their *buddhi* the same at all times,  
those, devoted to the welfare of all beings, indeed reach me.
- 12:5 *kleśo 'dhikataras teṣāṃ : avyaktāsaktacetāsām  
avyaktā hi gatir duḥkhaṃ : dehavadbhir avāpyate*  
The pain of those whose thinking is attached to the unmanifest is greater, for  
the unmanifest way is attained with difficulty by creatures.
- 12:6 *ye tu sarvāṇi karmāṇi : mayi saṃnyasya matparāḥ  
ananyenaiva yogena : mām dhyāyanta upāsate*  
But [those] who, devoted to me, resign all actions to me, thinking of me with  
exclusive *yoga*, and enter into me,...



- 12:7 *tesām ahaṃ samuddhartā : mṛtyu saṃsārasāgarāt  
bhavāmi nacirāt pārtha : mayy āveśitacetasām*  
...of those, whose thinking is caused to reach me, I am soon the rescuer from  
the ocean of *saṃsāra* and death.
- (...)
- 12:10 *abyāse 'py asamartho 'si : matkarmaparamo bhava  
madartham api karmāṇi : kurvan siddhim avāpsyasi*  
[If] you are incapable even of repetitive practice (of *yoga*), become one who is  
dedicated to my action: doing actions for my sake, you will achieve success.
- (...)
- 12:12 *śreyo hi jñānam abhyāsāj : jñānād dhyānaṃ viśiṣyate  
dhyānāt karmaphalatyāgas : tyāgac chāntir anantaram*  
For knowledge is better than repetitive practice; meditation is better than  
knowledge; renunciation of the fruits of action [is better] than meditation. From  
[this] renunciation there is peace immediately afterwards.
- (...)
- 12:15 *yasmān nodvijate loko lokān nodvijate ca yaḥ  
harṣāmarṣabhayodvegair : mukto yaḥ sa ca me priyaḥ*  
The one who the world is not agitated by, and who is not agitated by the world,  
and who is free of excitements, indignations, fears and agitations, is dear to me.
- 12:16 *anapekṣaḥ śucir dakṣa : udāsīno gatavyathaḥ  
sarvārambhaparityāgī : yo madbhaktaḥ sa me priyaḥ*  
Impartial, pure, able, uninvolved, their uneasiness gone, all their undertakings  
given up, the one who is my *bhakta* is dear to me.
- 12:17 *yo na hr̥ṣyati na dveṣṭi : na śocati na kāṅkṣati  
śubhāsubhāparityāgī : bhaktimān yaḥ sa me priyaḥ*  
The one who is not excited, does not hate, grieve or desire, who has given up  
the pleasant and the unpleasant, is characterised by *bhakti* and is dear to me.
- 12:18 *samaḥ śatrau ca mitre ca : tathā mānāpamānayoḥ  
śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkheṣu : samaḥ saṅgavivarjitaḥ*  
Equal towards enemy and friend and also towards honour and disgrace, equal  
towards cold and hot, happiness and sorrow, free from attachment,...
- 12:19 *tulyanindāstutir maunī : saṃtuṣṭo yena kenacit  
anīketaḥ sthiraṃmatir : bhaktimān me priyo naraḥ*  
...alike in reproach and blame, taciturn, contented with anything whatever,  
houseless, of firm resolution: the person characterised by *bhakti* is dear to me.
- 12:20 *ye tu dharmyāmṛtam idaṃ : yathoktaṃ paryupāsate  
śraddadhānā matparamā : bhaktās te 'tīva me priyaḥ*  
Those who partake of this which has been uttered, [they,] seats of faith, intent  
on me, *bhaktas*, are very dear to me.
- (...)
- 13:3 *tat kṣetraṃ yac ca yādṛk : ca yad vikāri yataś ca yat  
sa ca yo yatprabhāvaś ca : tat samāsenā me śṛṇu*

That field (*kṣetra*), and what [it is], and what it's like, what it changes into and from what, and who [*kṣetrajña*] is and what his power is: hear that from me in full.

(...)

13:5 *mahābhūtāny ahaṁkāro : buddhir avyaktam eva ca  
indriyāṇi daśaikam ca : pañca cendriyagocarāḥ*

The gross elements, *ahaṁkāra*, *buddhi* and even the unmanifest, the senses, the ten and the one, and the five sense-ranges,...

13:6 *icchā dveṣaḥ sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ : saṁghātaś cetanā dhṛtiḥ  
etat kṣetram samāsenā : savikāram udāhṛtam*

...desire, hatred, happiness, sorrow, the bodily aggregate, consciousness, constancy: this, in full, is declared to be the field with its modifications.

(...)

13:9 *asaktir anabhiṣvaṅgaḥ : putradāragrhādiṣu  
nityam ca samacittatvam : iṣṭāniṣṭopapattiṣu*

[as part of a list of what constitutes knowledge (of field and field-knower):]

...detachment, lack of attachment to children, wife, home *etc.*, continual even-mindedness with respect to occurrences both wished-for and unwished-for,...

(...)

13:12 *jñeyam yat tat pravakṣyāmi : yaj jñātvāmṛtam aśnute  
anādimat param brahma : na sat tan nāsad ucyate*

I will tell of that which is to be known, knowing which one obtains deathlessness: that beginningless, highest *brahman*, said to be neither *sat* nor *asat*.

13:13 *sarvataḥ pāṇipādaṁ tat : sarvato 'kṣiṣiromukham  
sarvataḥ śrutimal loke : sarvam āvṛtya tiṣṭhati*

That, with hands and feet everywhere, with eyes, heads and faces everywhere, hearing everywhere in the world, abides, covering all.

13:14 *sarvendriyaguṇābhāsam : sarvendriyavivarjitam  
asaktam sarvabhṛc caiva : nirguṇam guṇabhoktr ca*

[Though] having the appearance and qualities of all the senses [or having the appearance of all the senses and *guṇas*], it is free of the senses. Unattached, it supports all: *guṇa*-less, it experiences the *guṇas*.

13:15 *bahir antaś ca bhūtānām : acaram caram eva ca  
sūkṣmatvāt tad avijñeyam : dūrastham cāntike ca tat*

It is outside and [yet] within all creatures: though moving, it is motionless. Because of its subtlety, it is not to be understood, and, though distant, it is nearby.

13:16 *avibhaktam ca bhūteṣu : vibhaktam iva ca sthitam  
bhūtabhartr ca taj jñeyam : grasiṣṇu prabhaviṣṇu ca*

It is undistributed, though it remains distributed in creatures. It is to be known as the sustainer of creatures, [their] devourer and originator.

13:17 *jyotiṣām api taj jyotis : tamasah param ucyate*

*jñānaṃ jñeyaṃ jñānagamyam : hr̥di sarvasya dhiṣṭhitam*

It is said to be the light of lights beyond the darkness. Knowledge, that which is to be known, [and] that which is attainable by knowledge, it rests in the heart of all.

13:18 *iti kṣetram tathā jñānaṃ : jñeyaṃ coktam samāsataḥ  
madbhakta etad vijñāya : madbhāvāyopapadyate*

Thus the field, the knowledge and that which is to be known has been succinctly told of. The *bhakta* of me understands this and enters my being.

13:19 *prakṛtiṃ puruṣaṃ caiva : viddhy anādī ubhāv api  
vikāraṃś ca guṇāṃś caiva : viddhi prakṛtisambhavān*

Know *prakṛti* and also *puruṣa* to both be beginningless: know the modifications and *guṇas* produced by *prakṛti*.

13:20 *kāryakāraṇakartr̥tve : hetuḥ prakṛtir ucyate  
puruṣaḥ sukhaduḥkḥānām : bhoktr̥tve hetur ucyate*

*Prakṛti* is said to be the cause of to-be-doneness, instrumentship and doership. *Puruṣa* is said to be the cause of experiencerhood of happinesses and sorrows.

13:21 *puruṣaḥ prakṛtistho hi : bhūṅkte prakṛtijān guṇān  
kāraṇaṃ guṇasaṅgo 'sya : sadasatyonijanmasu*

*Puruṣa*, residing in *prakṛti*, enjoys the *guṇas* born of *prakṛti*. Contact with the *guṇas* is the means for its births in *sat* and *asat* wombs.

13:22 *upadraṣṭānumantā ca : bhartā bhoktā maheśvaraḥ  
paramātmēti cāpy ukto : dehe 'smin puruṣaḥ paraḥ*

The best *puruṣa* in this body is said to be witness, consentor, sustainer, enjoyer, great Lord and highest *ātman*.

13:23 *ya evaṃ vetti puruṣaṃ : prakṛtiṃ ca guṇaiḥ saha  
sarvathā vartamāno 'pi : na sa bhūyo 'bhijāyate*

The one who knows this *puruṣa*, and *prakṛti* together with the *guṇas*; is not born again, though acting in every way.

(...)

13:27 *samaṃ sarveṣu bhūteṣu : tiṣṭhantaṃ parameśvaram  
vinaśyatsv avinaśyantaṃ : yaḥ paśyati sa paśyati*

That one sees, who sees the same great Lord residing in all beings, not perishing in those that are perishing.

13:28 *samaṃ paśyan hi sarvatra : samavasthitam īśvaram  
na hinasty ātmanātmānam : tato yāti parāṃ gatim*

Seeing the same Lord established everywhere, they do not injure themselves by themselves, thus they go the highest way.

13:29 *prakṛtyaiva ca karmāṇi : kriyamāṇāni sarvaśaḥ  
yaḥ paśyati tathātmānam : akartāraṃ sa paśyati*

That one sees, who sees actions being done entirely by *prakṛti*, and thus the self to be a non-doer.

13:30 *yadā bhūtaprthagbhāvam : ekastham anupaśyati*

*tata eva ca vistāram : brahma sampadyate tadā*

When one sees the various condition of beings as resting in one, and as an expansion of that alone, then one partakes of *brahman*.

13:31 *anādītvān nirguṇatvāt : paramātmāyam avyayaḥ  
śārīrastho 'pi kaunteya : na karoti na lipyate*

Because of [its] being beginningless and without *guṇas*, this great imperishable *ātman* standing in the body does not act, and is not stained.

13:32 *yathā sarvagataṃ sauṣṇmyād : ākāśaṃ nopalipyate  
sarvatrāvasthito dehe : tathātmā nopalipyate*

Just as open space, gone everywhere, is not stained because of [its] subtlety, just so *ātman*, resting in a body everywhere, is not stained.

(...)

13:34 *kṣetrakṣetrajñāyor evam : antaraṃ jñānacakṣuṣā  
bhūtaprakṛtimokṣaṃ ca : ye vidur yānti te param*

Those who have in this way come to know, with the eye of knowledge, the difference between the field and the field-knower, and the liberation of beings from *prakṛti*, go to the highest.

14:1 *paraṃ bhūyaḥ pravakṣyāmi : jñānānām jñānam uttamam  
yaj jñātvā munayaḥ sarve : parāṃ siddhim ito gatāḥ*

Again I will tell you the supreme, best knowledge of knowledges, knowing which the *munis* went from here to highest perfection.

(...)

14:5 *sattvaṃ rajas tama iti : guṇāḥ prakṛtisambhavāḥ  
nibadhnanti mahābāho : dehe dehinam avyayam*

*Sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are the *guṇas* originating from *prakṛti*. They bind the imperishable *dehin* in the body.

(...)

14:14 *yadā sattve pravṛddhe tu : pralayaṃ yāti dehabhṛt  
tadottamavidām lokān : amalān pratipadyate*

When, *sattva* being abundant, the body-bearer arrives at death, then it attains the pure worlds of the knowers-of-the-best.

14:15 *rājasi pralayaṃ gatvā : karmasaṅgiṣu jāyate  
tathā pralīnas tamasi : mūḍhayoniṣu jāyate*

Having arrived at death in *rajas*, it is born amongst those who are attached to action; and if dissolved in *tamas*, it is born in the wombs of the confused.

(...)

14:18 *ūrdhvaṃ gacchanti sattvasthā : madhye tiṣṭhanti rājasāḥ  
jaghanyaḡuṇavyrttisthā : adho gacchanti tāmasāḥ*

Those who rest in *sattva* go upwards; the *rajasic* remain in the middle; the *tamasic*, abiding in the conduct of the lowest *guṇa*, go down.

(...)

14:20 *guṇān etān atītya trīn : dehī dehasamudbhavān  
janmamṛtyujarāduḥkhair : vimukto 'mṛtam aśnute*

*Dehin*, having gone beyond these three *guṇas* which originate the body, freed from birth, death, old age and sorrow, attains the immortal.

(...)

14:26 *mām ca yo 'vyabhicāreṇa : bhaktiyogena sevate  
sa guṇān samatītyaitān : brahmabhūyāya kalpate*  
The one who attends to me with undeviating *bhaktiyoga* goes beyond the *guṇas* and is adapted for becoming *brahman*.

(...)

15:1 *ūrdhvamūlam adhaḥśākham : aśvatthaṃ prāhūr avyayam  
chandāmsi yasya parṇāni : yas taṃ veda sa vedavit*  
They speak of the imperishable *aśvattha* tree with upward roots and branches below. The one who knows it, its leaves hymns, knows the Veda.

15:2 *adhaś cordhvaṃ prasṛtās tasya śākhā : guṇappravṛddhā viṣayappravālāḥ  
adhaś ca mūlāny anusamtatāni : karmānubandhīni manuṣyaloke*  
Its branches are spread out below and above, thickened by the *guṇas*, their shoots the sense-objects (*viṣayas*), and the roots are stretched out below, connecting with actions in the world of people.

15:3 *na rūpam asyeha tathopalabhyate : nānto na cādir na ca sampratiṣṭhā  
aśvatthaṃ enaṃ suvirūḍhamūlam : asaṅgaśastrena dr̥dhena chittvā*  
No form of it is found here, no end, no beginning, no continuity. That *aśvattha* of well-sprouted roots is to be cut down with the steadied sword of non-attachment,...

15:4 *tataḥ padaṃ tat parimārgitavyaṃ : yasmin gatā na nivartanti bhūyaḥ  
tam eva cādyaṃ puruṣaṃ prapadye : yataḥ pravṛtīḥ prasṛtā purānī*  
...and that station is to be made for, having gone to which they do not return again: 'I resort to that same original *puruṣa* from which is spread out the ancient turning-forth'.

15:5 *nirmānamohā jitasāṅgadoṣā : adhyātmanityā vinivṛttakāmāḥ  
dvandvair vimuktāḥ sukhaduḥkhasamjñair : gacchanty amūḍhāḥ padam  
avyayaṃ tat*  
Those without arrogance or delusion, whose *doṣa* of attachment has been conquered, who are always [in] the *adhyātman*, whose desires have ceased, who are freed from the *dvandvas* called happiness and sorrow, go, unconfused, to that imperishable station.

15:6 *na tad bhāsayate sūryo : na śaśāṅko na pāvakaḥ  
yad gatvā na nivartante : tad dhāma paramaṃ mama*  
The sun does not illuminate it, nor the moon, nor fire. It is my highest abode, having gone to which one does not return.

15:7 *mamaivāṃśo jīvaloke : jīvabhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ  
manaḥsaṣṭhānīndriyāni : prakṛtisthāni karṣati*  
An eternal part of me, become living in the world of the living, drags the senses, whose sixth is *manas*, which remain in *prakṛti*.

15:8 *śarīraṃ yad avāpnoti : yac cāpy utkrāmatīśvaraḥ*

*grhītvaitāni samyāti : vāyur gandhān ivāśayāt*

As the Lord obtains a body, and as it dies, it takes these [senses and *manas*] and goes, like the wind [takes] the smells from a place.

15:9 *śrotam cakṣuḥ sparśanam ca : rasanam ghrānam eva ca  
adhiṣṭhāya manas cāyam : viśayān upasevate*

This [Lord] superintends hearing, sight, touch, taste, smell and *manas*, and uses the objects of sense (*viśayas*).

(...)

15:11 *yatanto yoginaś cainam : paśyanty ātmany avasthitam  
yatanto 'py akṛtātmāno : nainam paśyanty acetasaḥ*

The striving *yogins* see it [the Lord] residing in themselves. The insensible, their selves unmade, though striving, do not see it.

(...)

15:16 *dvāv imau puruṣau loke : kṣaraś cākṣara eva ca  
kṣaraḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni : kūṭastho 'kṣara ucyate*

In the world there are these two *puruṣas*: the perishable and the imperishable. The perishable is all creatures, the imperishable is said to be 'resting on the peak'.

15:17 *uttamaḥ puruṣas tv anyah : paramātmety udāhṛtaḥ  
yo lokatrayam āviśya : bibharty avyaya īśvaraḥ*

But there is another, higher *puruṣa*, called 'the highest *ātman*', the imperishable Lord which, having entered the triple world, sustains [it].

15:18 *yasmāt kṣaram atīto 'ham : akṣarād api cottamaḥ  
ato 'smi loke vede ca : prathitaḥ puruṣottamaḥ*

I surpass the perishable and I am higher than even the imperishable: hence I am known as *puruṣottama* in the world and in the Veda.

(...)

16:1 *abhayaṁ sattvasaṁsuddhir : jñānayogavyavasthitaḥ  
dānam damaś ca yajñas ca : svādhyāyas tapa ārjavam*

[Beginning of a list of the characteristics of those born to the destiny of the *devas*:] Fearlessness, purity of being, residence in knowledge and in *yoga*, generosity and self-restraint and *yajña*, solitary recitation, austerity, sincerity...

(...)

16:5 *daivī sampad vimokṣāya : nibandhāyāsuri matā  
mā śucaḥ sampadam daivīm : abhijāto 'si pāṇḍava*

The destiny of the *devas* is considered to be for liberation, that of the *asuras* for bondage. Do not lament: you were born to the destiny of the *devas*.

(...)

16:7 *pravṛttiṁ ca nivṛttiṁ ca : janā na vidur āsurāḥ  
na śucaṁ nāpi cācāro : na satyaṁ teṣu vidyate*

*Asuric* folk have not come to know *pravṛtti* or *nivṛtti*. Neither purity nor good conduct nor truth is known by them.

16:8 *asatyam apratiṣṭham te : jagad āhur anīśvaram*

*aparasparasambhūtaṃ : kim anyat kāmahaitukam*

They say the world is unreal, without foundation, without Lord, [or] not produced by causal sequence. By what other thing [then]? By reason of desire.

- 16:9 *etāṃ dṛṣṭim avaṣṭabhya : naṣṭātmāno 'lpabuddhayaḥ  
prabhavanty ugrakarmāṇaḥ : kṣayāya jagato 'hitāḥ*  
Resting on this view, themselves lost, their *buddhis* tiny, their actions cruel, the improper ones come forth for the destruction of the world.
- 16:10 *kāmam āsṛitya duṣpūraṃ : dambhamānamadānvitāḥ  
mahād grhītvāsadgrāhān : pravartante 'śucivratāḥ*  
Accompanied by hypocrisy, pride and lust, they resort to insatiable desire, seize false notions through delusion, and carry out impure vows.
- 16:11 *cintāṃ aparimeyāṃ ca : pralayāntām upāśritāḥ  
kāmapabhogaparamā : etāvad iti niścītāḥ*  
Resting on illimitable anxiety which ends in death, devoted to the enjoyment of desires, settled that '[there is] this much',...
- 16:12 *āśāpāśaṣatair baddhāḥ : kāmakrodhaparāyaṇāḥ  
ihante kāmabhogārtham : anyāyenārthasaṃcayān*  
...bound by one hundred nooses of hope, devoted to desire and anger, they are eager for hoards of wealth by means of unjust action for the sake of the enjoyment of desires.
- 16:13 *idam adya mayā labdham : imaṃ prāpsyē manoratham  
idam astīdam api me : bhaviṣyati punar dhanam*  
'This was obtained by me today; this wish I will achieve; this is mine, this wealth will be [mine] besides;...
- 16:14 *asau mayā hataḥ śatrur : haniṣyē cāparān api  
īśvaro 'ham ahaṃ bhogī : siddho 'ham balavān sukhī*  
...that enemy was slain by me, and I will slay those others too. I am Lord, I am enjoyer, I am successful, strong, content,...
- 16:15 *ādhyo 'bhijanavān asmi : ko 'nyo 'sti sadṛśo mayā  
yakṣyē dāsyāmi modiṣya : ity ajñānavimohitāḥ*  
...I am rich and of noble descent: who else is there like me? I will offer *yajña*, I will give, I will be merry': thus [think / say] those confused by ignorance.
- 16:16 *anekacittavibhrāntā : mohajālasamāvṛtāḥ  
prasaktāḥ kāmabhogeṣu : patanti narake 'śucau*  
Bewildered by various thoughts, enveloped in confusions and snares, clinging to the enjoyment of desires, they fall into impure *naraka*.
- 16:17 *ātmasambhāvitāḥ stabdhā : dhanamānamadānvitāḥ  
yajante nāmayajñais te : dambhenāvidhipūrvakam*  
Esteemed by themselves, obstinate, accompanied by wealth, pride and lust, they offer *yajñas*-in-name[-only] with hypocrisy, not according to the prior injunction.
- 16:18 *ahaṃkāraṃ balaṃ darpaṃ : kāmam krodham ca saṃśritāḥ*

*mām ātmaparadeheṣu : pradviṣanto 'bhyasūyakāḥ*  
Resorting to *aḥamkāra*, force, conceit, desire and anger, the indignant ones  
hate me in their own bodies and in those of others.

16:19 *tān ahaṃ dviṣataḥ krūrān : saṃsāreṣu narādhamān*  
*kṣipāmy ajasram aśubhān : āsurīsv eva yoṇiṣu*  
I perpetually throw those hating, cruel, disagreeable, vilest of folk into  
*saṃsāra*, into *asuric* wombs.

(...)

16:22 *etair vimuktaḥ kaunteya : tamodvāraīs tribhir naraḥ*  
*ācaraty ātmanaḥ śreyas : tato yāti parām gatim*  
A person freed from these three doors of *tamas* [desire, anger and greed]  
proceeds to the best thing for themselves: then they go the highest way.

(...)

17:2 *trividhā bhavati śraddhā : dehinām sā svabhāvajā*  
*sāttvikī rājasī caiva : tāmasī ceti tāṃ śṛṇu*  
The faith of *dehins* is of three kinds, born of [their] *svabhāva*: *sattvic*, *rajasic*  
and *tamasic*. Hear about it.

(...)

17:11 *aphalākāṅkṣibhir yajño : vidhidṛṣṭo ya ijjate*  
*yaṣṭavyam eveti manaḥ : samādhāya sa sāttvikah*  
The precept-seeing *yajña* which is offered by those not desiring [its] fruit, the  
mind having settled [that it is] 'just to be offered', that [*yajña*] is *sattvic*.

17:12 *abhisamdhāya tu phalaṃ : dambhārtham api caiva yat*  
*ijjate bhārataśreṣṭha : taṃ yajñam viddhi rājasam*  
But know that *yajña* to be *rajasic* which is offered with a view to [its] fruit and  
for the sake of deceit.

17:13 *vidhihīnam asṛṣṭānnaṃ : mantrahīnam adakṣiṇam*  
*śraddhāviraḥitaṃ yajñaṃ : tāmasaṃ paricakṣate*  
They call that *yajña* *tamasic* which is without precept, with food not given up,  
without *mantra*, without fee, devoid of faith.

(...)

17:23 *om tat sat iti nirdeśo : brahmaṇas trīvidhaḥ smṛtaḥ*  
*brāhmaṇās tena vedās ca : yajñās ca vihitāḥ purā*  
'*Om tat sat*': thus is remembered the threefold description of *brahman*. The  
*brāhmaṇas* and the Vedas and the *yajñas* were fixed by it of old.

17:24 *tasmād om ity udāhṛtya : yajñadānatapahkriyāḥ*  
*pravartante vidhānuktāḥ : satataṃ brahmavādinām*  
So the *brahman*-speakers' rule-enjoined acts of *yajña*, donation and austerity  
always occur, '*om*' having been declared.

17:25 *tad ity anabhisamdhāya : phalaṃ yajñatapahkriyāḥ*  
*dānakriyās ca vividhāḥ : kriyante mokṣakāṅkṣibhiḥ*  
[With] '*tat*', without aiming for fruit, acts of *yajña* and austerity and various  
acts of donation are performed by those desiring *mokṣa*.



- 17:26 *sadbhāve sādhubhāve ca : sad ity etat prayujyate  
praśaste karmaṇi tathā : sacchabdaḥ pārtha yujyate*  
This 'sat' is pronounced in existence and in goodness: also the sound 'sat' is yoked in a commended action.
- 17:27 *yajñe tapasi dāne ca : sthitiḥ sad iti cocyate  
karma caiva tadarthīyaṃ : sad ity evābhidhīyate*  
In *yajña*, in austerity and in donation, constancy is said to be 'sat'. Also, action relating to it is called 'sat'.
- 17:28 *aśraddhayā hutam dattam : tapas taptam kṛtam ca yat  
asad ity ucyate pārtha : na ca tat pretya no iha*  
The offering given, the austerity undergone, and what[ever else] is done without faith is said to be 'asad', and it is not, neither hereafter nor in this world.
- (...)
- 18:3 *tyājyaṃ doṣavad ity eke : karma prāhur manīṣiṇaḥ  
yajñadānatapaḥkarma : na tyājyaṃ iti cāpare*  
Some sages declare action to be faulty and to be abandoned, and others that the action of *yajña*, donation and austerity is not to be abandoned.
- (...)
- 18:5 *yajñadānatapaḥkarma : na tyājyaṃ kāryam eva tat  
yajño dānam tapaś caiva : pāvanāni manīṣiṇām*  
The action of *yajña*, donation and austerity is not to be abandoned, it is to be done. *Yajña*, donation and austerity are the sages' means of purification.
- (...)
- 18:7 *niyatasya tu samnyāsaḥ : karmaṇo nopapadyate  
mohāt tasya parityāgas : tāmasaḥ parikīrtitaḥ*  
The renunciation of a fixed act is not suitable: its abandonment out of confusion is called *tamasic*.
- (...)
- 18:9 *kāryam ity eva yat karma : niyatam kriyate 'rjuna  
saṅgam tyaktvā phalam caiva : sa tyāgaḥ sāttviko mataḥ*  
'To be done': when a fixed action is done thus, having abandoned attachment and fruit, that is considered to be *sattvic* austerity.
- (...)
- 18:17 *yasya nāhaṃkṛto bhāvo : buddhir yasya na lipyate  
hatvāpi sa imāṃl lokān : na hanti na nibadhyate*  
The one whose condition is not made by 'I', whose *buddhi* is not stained, does not kill and is not bound, even having killed these people [or these worlds].
- (...)
- 18:23 *niyatam saṅgarahitam : arāgadveṣataḥ kṛtam  
aphalaprepsunā karma : yat tat sāttvikam ucyate*  
That action is said to be *sattvic* which is enjoined, performed without attachment, without passion and hatred, by one not desiring to obtain fruit.

(...)

18:40 *na tad asti pṛthivyām vā : divi deveṣu vā punaḥ  
sattvaṃ prakṛtijair muktaṃ : yad ebhiḥ syāt tribhir guṇaiḥ*  
Neither on earth nor again in the sky amongst the *devas* is there that entity  
which could be free of these three *prakṛti*-born *guṇas*.

18:41 *brāhmaṇakṣatriyaviśāṃ : sūdrānāṃ ca paraṃtapa  
karmāṇi pravibhaktāni : svabhāvaprabhavair guṇaiḥ*  
The actions of *brāhmaṇas*, *kṣatriyas*, the *viś* and the *sūdras* are divided by  
means of the *guṇas* derived from *svabhāva*.

18:42 *śamo damaḥ tapaḥ śaucaṃ : kṣāntir ārjavam eva ca  
jñānam vijñānam āstikiyaṃ : brahmakarma svabhāvajam*  
Equanimity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forbearance, honesty, knowledge,  
understanding and piety is *brahman*-action, born of *svabhāva*.

18:43 *śauryaṃ tejo dhṛtir dākṣyaṃ : yuddhe cāpy apalāyanam  
dānam īśvarabhāvaś ca : kṣātraṃ karma svabhāvajam*  
Valour, ardour, firmness, industry, not fleeing in battle, generosity and Lordly  
being is *kṣatra*-action, born of *svabhāva*.

18:44 *kṛṣigorakṣyavāṇijyaṃ : vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam  
paricaryātmakaṃ karma : sūdrasyāpi svabhāvajam*  
Agriculture, cow-protection and commerce is *Vaiśya*-action, born of *svabhāva*.  
The action of the *sūdra*, born of *svabhāva*, is of the nature of service.

(...)

18:47 *śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ : paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt  
svabhāvaniyataṃ karma : kurvan nāpnoti kilbiṣam*  
One's own imperfect *dharma* is better than the well-performed *dharma* of  
another. Doing the action fixed by *svabhāva*, one does not obtain stain.

(...)

18:49 *asaktabuddhiḥ sarvatra : jītātmā vigatasprhaḥ  
naiṣkarmyasiddhiṃ paramāṃ : saṃnyāsenādhiḡacchati*  
One whose *buddhi* is always *asakta*, whose self has been conquered, whose  
longing is gone, goes by means of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) [of the fruits of  
action] to the highest success of actionlessness [*i.e. karmabandha*-lessness].

18:50 *siddhiṃ prāpto yathā brahma : tathāpnoti nibodha me  
samāsenaiḡa kaunteya : niṣṭhā jñānasya yā parā*  
Learn from me how one who has obtained success also fully obtains *brahman*,  
which is the highest state of knowledge.

(...)

18:53 *ahaṃkāraṃ balaṃ darpaṃ : kāmaṃ krodhaṃ parigrahaṃ  
vimucya nirmamaḥ śānto : brahmabhūyāya kalpate*  
Having abandoned *ahaṃkāra*, force, pride, desire, anger and grasping, without  
'mine', calm, one is adapted for becoming *brahman*.

(...)

- 18:57 *cetasā sarvakarmāṇi : mayi saṁnyasya matparaḥ  
buddhiyogam upāśritya : maccittaḥ satataṁ bhava*  
Having set down all actions in me with thought, devoted to me, having resorted to *buddhiyoga*, become one whose thoughts are continuously on me.
- 18:58 *maccittaḥ sarvadurgāṇi : matprasādāt tariṣyasi  
atha cet tvam ahaṁkārān : na śroṣyasi vinakṣyasi*  
Thoughts on me, from my favour<sup>2</sup> you will cross over all dangers. But if, from *ahaṁkāra*, you will not listen, you will be lost.
- 18:59 *yad ahaṁkāraṁ āśritya : na yotsya iti manyase  
mithyaiṣa vyavasāyas te : prakṛtis tvāṁ niyokṣyati*  
If, having had recourse to *ahaṁkāra*, you think 'I will not fight', this, your resolution, is wrong: *prakṛti* will impel you.
- 18:60 *svabhāvajena kaunteya : nibaddhaḥ svena karmaṇā  
kartuṁ necchasi yan mohāt : kariṣyasi avaśo 'pi tat*  
Bound by your own action, born of *svabhāva*, that which, from confusion, you do not want to do, you will do, even unwisely.
- 18:61 *īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānāṁ : hr̥ddeṣe 'rjuna tiṣṭhati  
bhrāmāyan sarvabhūtāni : yantrārūḍhāni māyayā*  
The Lord stands in the heart-region of all beings, causing, by *māyā*, all beings, mounted on an apparatus, to move round.
- 18:62 *tam eva śaraṇaṁ gaccha : sarvabhāvena bhārata  
tatprasādāt parāṁ sāntim : sthānaṁ prāpsyasi śāśvatam*  
Go to him alone, the refuge, with all [your] being. By that favour you will attain supreme peace, the eternal state.
- (...)
- 18:66 *sarvadharmān parityajya : mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja  
ahaṁ tvā sarvapāpebhyo : mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ*  
Abandon all *dharmas* and go to me, the only refuge. I will free you from all misfortunes (*pāpas*): do not grieve.
- (...)
- 18:68 *ya idaṁ paramaṁ guhyaṁ : madbhakteṣv abhidāsyati  
bhaktiṁ mayi parāṁ kṛtvā : mām evaiṣyaty asaṁśayaḥ*  
The one who will bestow this highest mystery on my *bhaktas* will make the highest *bhakti* of me and will surely come to me.
- 18:69 *na ca tasmān manuṣyeṣu : kaścin me priyakṛttamaḥ  
bhavitā na ca me tasmād : anyaḥ priyataro bhuvī*  
And so amongst people no one is a greater benefactor to me, and so no other on earth has become more dear to me.
- (...)
- 18:71 *śraddhāvān anasūyaś ca : śṛṇuyād api yo naraḥ*

<sup>2</sup> I.e. on account of my having revealed the future and the supreme form to you.

*so 'pi muktaḥ śubhāṃl lokān : prāpnuyāt puṇyakarmaṇām*  
Whoever, faithful and trusting, hears [this *dharmic* dialogue], is freed and obtains the splendid worlds of the righteous.

18:72 *kaccid etac chrutaṃ pārtha : tvayaikāgreṇa cetasā*  
*kaccid ajñānasammohaḥ : praṇaṣṭas te dhananjaya*  
Has this been heard by you with one-pointed mind? Has your delusion of ignorance disappeared?

18:73 *naṣṭo mohaḥ smṛtir labhdā : tvatprasādān mayācyuta*  
*sthito 'smi gatasamdehaḥ : kariṣye vacanaṃ tava*  
[A:] The confusion is gone: through your kindness I have found memory. I am standing, doubt gone, and will act out your instruction.

## Appendix 2: Glossary of Sanskrit words used

This glossary does not include names of persons, deities or texts.

<i>Acala</i>	unmoving
<i>Ācāra</i>	conduct, behaviour, custom, precept
<i>Ācarata</i>	acting, behaving, proceeding
<i>Acintya</i>	unthinkable
<i>Adharma</i>	behaviour contrary to <i>dharma</i>
<i>Adhikāra</i>	entitlement, qualification
<i>Adhiṣṭhāna</i>	basis, standing place, seat, site
<i>Adhyātman</i>	that which is concerned with the individual or self
<i>Advaita</i>	non-dual
<i>Agni</i>	fire
<i>Aham</i>	I
<i>Ahaṁkāra</i>	that which does 'I'
<i>Ahaṁkārabandha</i>	(made-up compound) bound by that which does 'I'
<i>Aiśvarya</i>	supremacy, power, Lordliness
<i>Aja</i>	unborn
<i>Ajīva</i>	non-living
<i>Ājīvikas</i>	a non-Vedic salvationist ascetic movement of the first millenium BCE
<i>Akalmaṣa</i>	stainless, sinless, guiltless
<i>Ākāśa</i>	space
<i>Akṣaya</i>	non-perishing, non-melting
<i>Amṛta</i>	deathless(ness)
<i>Ananta</i>	without end
<i>Antaḥkaraṇa</i>	inner doer
<i>Anyavaśa</i>	(made up compound) under wish of another
<i>Apsaras</i>	heavenly water-loving females
<i>Apūrva</i>	unprecedented, the extra invisible cause of the world's details due to <i>karmabandha</i> .
<i>Ārya</i>	proper, noble
<i>Asakta</i>	non-attached
<i>Asat</i>	non- <i>sat</i> , non-formed, incoherent, non-existent, bad estate
<i>Āśrama</i>	estate
<i>Aśubha</i>	harm, bad, evil, unpleasant(ness)
<i>Asura</i>	monster
<i>Aśvamedha</i>	horse sacrifice
<i>Aśvattha</i>	a certain mythologised tree, <i>ficus religiosa</i> , 'under which horses stand' (Monier-Williams 1963:115)
<i>Asvavaśa</i>	(made-up compound) by wish(es) not one's own
<i>Ātman</i>	self
<i>Atyanta</i>	endless, absolute, exceeding
<i>Ātyantika</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Avaśa</i>	wishless
<i>Avaśam</i>	unwishingly
<i>Avaśam prakṛter vaśāt</i>	unwishingly by wish of <i>prakṛti</i> / controlled by <i>prakṛti</i> / controlled by [my] nature
<i>Avatāra</i>	descent
<i>Avatāraṇa</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Avidyā</i>	knowledgelessness

<i>Avikārya</i>	untransformable
<i>Avyakta</i>	unmanifest
<i>Avyaya pada</i>	imperishable station
<i>Bahuśākha</i>	multi-branched
<i>Bandh</i>	(verbal root) bind
<i>Bandha</i>	bond
<i>Bandhu</i>	bound thing, connection, kinsperson
<i>Bhaj</i>	(verbal root) share, divide, apportion
<i>Bhakta</i>	shared, apportioned, votary
<i>Bhakti</i>	sharing
<i>Bhaktiyoga</i>	(see <i>bhakti</i> and <i>yoga</i> )
<i>Bodhisattva</i>	a being dedicated to the enlightenment of all beings
<i>Brahmahūya</i>	becoming <i>brahman</i>
<i>Brāhmahatya</i>	the killing of a <i>brāhmaṇa</i>
<i>Brahman</i>	utterance, effusion, the power of utterance, the essential existent power
<i>Brāhmaṇa</i>	a person supposedly intrinsically connected to <i>brahman</i> , a person of the class of ritual and verbal specialists
<i>Brahmanirvāṇa</i>	(see <i>brahman</i> and <i>nirvāṇa</i> )
<i>Brahmasaṃsparśa</i>	contact with <i>brahman</i>
<i>Brahmavidah</i>	one who knows <i>brahman</i>
<i>Brahmavidyā</i>	knowledge of <i>brahman</i>
<i>Bhāṣya</i>	exegetical commentary
<i>Bhūtagrāmam imaṃ kṛtsnam</i>	this whole village of creatures
<i>Buddhi</i>	a certain inspiring faculty of mentality, the state of this faculty in an individual person
<i>Buddhibandha</i>	(made-up compound) bound by <i>buddhi</i>
<i>Buddhibheda</i>	splitting of <i>buddhi</i>
<i>Buddhināśa</i>	loss of <i>buddhi</i>
<i>Buddhiyoga</i>	(see <i>buddhi</i> and <i>yoga</i> )
<i>Buddhiyukta</i>	yoked in / by <i>buddhi</i>
<i>Cittasamtāna</i>	continuity of consciousness
<i>Daitya</i>	monster, patronymic of Diti
<i>Daiva</i>	of the <i>devas</i> , celestial
<i>Dāna</i>	giving
<i>Darśana</i>	seeing, view
<i>Dāsa</i>	monster
<i>Dasyu</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Deha</i>	body
<i>Dehin</i>	(that which is) possessed of / characterised by body
<i>Deva</i>	heavenly person, deity
<i>Devayāna</i>	way of the <i>devas</i>
<i>Devayānin</i>	one going the way of the <i>devas</i>
<i>Dhamma</i>	'Buddhist' version of <i>dharma</i> , variously nuanced
<i>Dharma</i>	that which sustains and is sustained, behavioural code / rule / duty, correct / appropriate / intrinsic procedure
<i>Diṣṭa</i>	allotment, destiny
<i>Divya</i>	heavenly, celestial
<i>Doṣa</i>	fault, offence, guilt, damage
<i>Duḥkha</i>	sorrow, misery, dis-ease, discontent
<i>Durita</i>	bad, evil

<i>Dvaita</i>	dual
<i>Dvandva</i>	pair, dualism
<i>Dvija</i>	twice-born (refers to a rite of passage as a ceremonial second birth), person of one of the first three <i>varṇas</i> (see <i>ārya</i> )
<i>Eka</i>	one, single
<i>Gandharva</i>	one of a class of heavenly personages
<i>Gāyatrī</i>	a certain lyrical metre, a piece composed in that metre
<i>Gītākāra</i>	hypothesised author of the ( <i>Bhagavad</i> ) <i>gītā</i>
<i>Gr̥hya</i>	domestic
<i>Guṇa</i>	quality, one of three essential qualities ( <i>sattva</i> , <i>rajas</i> and <i>tamas</i> ) present in varying proportions in all manifest things
<i>Guṇasammūḍha</i>	confused by the <i>guṇas</i>
<i>Guru</i>	weighty, a teacher / preceptor
<i>Hotṛ</i>	a certain ritual role
<i>Indriya</i>	power, sense
<i>Indriyārtha</i>	that which is sensed
<i>Iti anuśūsruma</i>	thus we have repeatedly heard
<i>Itihāsa purāṭaṇa</i>	ancient lore or tale
<i>Janman</i>	birth
<i>Japayajña</i>	ritual recitation to oneself
<i>Jīva</i>	living thing, life, vital principle, 'soul'
<i>Jīvabhūta</i>	consisting of life, become alive
<i>Jīvanmukta</i>	<i>mokṣa</i> whilst still alive
<i>Jīvanmuktin</i>	one who has attained <i>mokṣa</i> whilst still alive
<i>Jñāna</i>	knowledge
<i>Jñānayoga</i>	<i>yoga</i> of knowledge
<i>Kaivalya</i>	isolation (of the 'soul' from involvement with matter)
<i>Kāla</i>	time, proper time
<i>Kālavāda</i>	discourse about <i>kāla</i>
<i>Kālavādin</i>	one who discourses about <i>kāla</i>
<i>Kaliyuga</i>	the fourth and shortest of the <i>yugas</i> , during which <i>dharma</i> is at its nadir
<i>Kalmaṣa</i>	sin, stain, impurity
<i>Kāma</i>	desire
<i>Kāmya</i>	derived from desire
<i>Kāraṇa</i>	doer, cause, reason, motive
<i>Karman</i>	action
<i>Karmabandha</i>	bound by action
<i>Karmabandhana</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Karmaphala</i>	fruit of action
<i>Karmaphalatyāga</i>	renunciation of the fruit of action
<i>Karmayoga</i>	<i>yoga</i> of action
<i>Karmayogin</i>	one exemplifying <i>karmayoga</i>
<i>Karmin</i>	actor, agent
<i>Kavi</i>	sage, poet
<i>Kaviṃ purāṇam anuśāsītāra</i>	ancient governor sage
<i>Krodha</i>	anger
<i>Kṛtayuga</i>	the first and longest of the <i>yugas</i> , during which <i>dharma</i> is at its zenith
<i>Kṣatra</i>	force, might, military strength

<i>Kṣatriya</i>	warrior, ruler, person of the second <i>varṇa</i>
<i>Kṣatriyadharmā</i>	the <i>dharma</i> of a <i>kṣatriya</i>
<i>Kṣetrajña</i>	field-knower, witnesser of individual existential process within the world
<i>Kula</i>	tribe, kin-group
<i>Kuladharmā</i>	<i>dharma</i> pertaining to kin-group
<i>Kulakṣaya</i>	loss of kin-group
<i>Kuśīlava</i>	travelling story-teller
<i>Leśyā</i>	light, colour
<i>Lip</i>	(verbal root) stain, besmirch
<i>Loka</i>	place, (occasionally) people
<i>Lokasaṃgraha</i>	the holding-together of the world(s)
<i>Lokasaṃgrahadharmā</i>	(made-up compound) <i>dharma</i> pertaining to the holding-together of the world(s)
<i>Mahatpāpa</i>	great badness / sin / offence / guilt / mischief
<i>Manas</i>	mind
<i>Māyā</i>	extraordinary power, artifice, magic
<i>Mayādhyakṣena</i>	by my supervision
<i>Mithyācāra</i>	one whose behaviour is improper
<i>Moha</i>	bewilderment, perplexity, confusion
<i>Mokṣa</i>	release
<i>Muktasaṅga</i>	one whose attachment has been released or whose attachment is to release
<i>Muni</i>	ascetic, sage, seer
<i>Mṛtyu</i>	death
<i>Na anuśocitum arhasi</i>	you ought not to grieve
<i>Naraka</i>	hell, ruin
<i>Nāstika</i>	one who deems that 'it is not'
<i>Nigūḍha</i>	hidden, secret
<i>Nihatāḥ pūrvam</i>	previously killed
<i>Niḥśreya</i>	unbettered, most preferable
<i>Nirāśraya</i>	without support or shelter
<i>Nirguṇa</i>	without qualities, not characterised by the <i>guṇas</i>
<i>Nirguṇatva</i>	<i>guṇa</i> -lessness
<i>Nirvāṇa</i>	blowing-out, 'Buddhist' term for release
<i>Niścala</i>	unmoving
<i>Nīti</i>	policy
<i>Nitya nigūḍha</i>	ever-hidden, Jain term for the inexhaustible protozoic reservoir of souls
<i>Nivṛtti</i>	non-turning, renunciative soteriology
<i>Niyata</i>	prescribed, established, enjoined, fixed
<i>Niyati</i>	constraint, destiny, necessity
<i>Niyativādin</i>	one who discourses about <i>niyati</i>
<i>Niyukta</i>	yoked, bound, fastened, settled
<i>Paṇḍit</i>	expert, scholar
<i>Pada</i>	station, footing
<i>Pāda</i>	foot (metrical measure)
<i>Pāpa</i>	badness, sin, offence, guilt, mischief
<i>Pāpman</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Para</i>	other, supreme, highest
<i>Para gati</i>	the highest course
<i>Paradharmā</i>	the <i>dharma</i> of another



<i>Paramam puruṣam divyam</i>	supreme celestial person
<i>Paramam rūpam aiśvaram</i>	supreme Lordly form
<i>Paramārtha satya</i>	highest / real truth
<i>Paramātman</i>	supreme self
<i>Parinirvāṇa</i>	final <i>nirvāṇa</i> (refers to the death of one who has attained <i>nirvāṇa</i> whilst alive)
<i>Pataka</i>	downfall, undoing
<i>Pauruṣa</i>	derived from the person, responsible effort, heroism
<i>Phala</i>	fruit
<i>Pitṛ</i>	father, ancestor
<i>Pitṛloka</i>	place / world of the <i>pitṛs</i>
<i>Pitṛyāna</i>	way of / to the <i>pitṛs</i> .
<i>Pradhāna</i>	essence, primary germ, primary nature
<i>Prajāpati</i>	Lord of creatures
<i>Prajñā</i>	knowledge, wisdom
<i>Prakṛti</i>	substance, matter, nature
<i>Prasāda</i>	favour, kindness
<i>Pravṛtti</i>	turning-forth, active soteriology
<i>Prīti</i>	joy, gladness
<i>Pūjā</i>	homage
<i>Punarjanman</i>	repeated birth
<i>Punarmṛtyu</i>	repeated death
<i>Puruṣa</i>	person, the non-substantial element
<i>Puruṣakāra</i>	done by a person, heroism, assertiveness
<i>Puruṣottama</i>	ultimate <i>puruṣa</i> , associated with the world as a whole rather than with an individual creature
<i>Rājan</i>	king, ruler, chief
<i>Rajas</i>	passion, urgency
<i>Rājasūya</i>	a ritual asserting sovereignty
<i>Rasa</i>	juice, essence, flavour
<i>Rasavarjam</i>	except flavour
<i>Ṛṣi</i>	seer, poet, prototypical personage or power (in cosmological or astronomical sense)
<i>Rta</i>	order, propriety, ruliness
<i>Saguṇa</i>	characterised by <i>guṇas</i>
<i>Saḥ</i>	he / it
<i>Sakta</i>	attached
<i>Śama</i>	equanimity
<i>Samgha</i>	host, assembly, combination, community
<i>Samkalpa</i>	intention, volition, purpose, motive, conception
<i>Sāṃkhya</i>	(with capital 's') ancient Indian tradition of analysis of the composition and evolution of the universe and the human creature
<i>Samnyāsa</i>	(without capital 's') enumeration, reckoning renunciation (usually of possessions and worldly duties and interests, but reinterpreted by Kṛṣṇa as renunciation of <i>phalas</i> / <i>kāmas</i> / <i>saṃkalpas</i> )
<i>Samsāra</i>	the process of <i>prakṛti</i> 's association with <i>puruṣa</i>
<i>Samsiddhi</i>	success, perfection, accomplishment
<i>Samvṛtti satya</i>	common truth, practical truth, validity within the symbolic order
<i>Śānti</i>	peace, tranquillity

<i>Śarīra</i>	body
<i>Śarīrastha</i>	resting on or in a body
<i>Śarīrin</i>	(that which is) possessed of / characterised by body (see <i>dehin</i> )
<i>Sarvagata</i>	gone everywhere
<i>Sat</i>	real, existent, true, good, formed, coherent
<i>Sattva</i>	<i>sat</i> -ness, purity
<i>Siddhi</i>	success, perfection
<i>Skandha</i>	bundle, aggregate, division of constituents
<i>Śloka</i>	verse, a patterned unit of utterance with four <i>pādas</i> of eight syllables each
<i>Smṛti</i>	remembrance, tradition
<i>Soma</i>	intoxicating drink
<i>Sprhā</i>	longing, envy
<i>Śrāddha</i>	ritual honouring (of) the deceased
<i>Śraddhā</i>	faith, trust, confidence
<i>Śramaṇa</i>	one who toils, mendicant ascetic
<i>Śreya</i>	preferable
<i>Śruti</i>	that which has been heard, (Vedic) utterance in precise syllabic detail
<i>Sthāna</i>	state, condition, location
<i>Sthitaprajña</i>	firm in wisdom
<i>Śūdra</i>	servant
<i>Sukha</i>	happiness, satisfaction, content, pleasantness
<i>Sukhin</i>	one characterised by <i>sukha</i>
<i>Śūnyatā</i>	emptiness
<i>Sūrya</i>	sun
<i>Sūta</i>	charioteer, proclaimer, bard, equerry
<i>Svabāndhava</i>	relative, something bound to oneself
<i>Svabhāva</i>	own-being, particular nature
<i>Svadharmā</i>	activities appropriate to a particular thing due to that thing being what it is
<i>Svajana</i>	own folk, own people
<i>Svakalmaṣa</i>	own sin / stain / impurity
<i>Svarga</i>	heaven, abode of light
<i>Svargaloka</i>	heavenly place
<i>Tamas</i>	darkness, inertness, dullness, incoherence
<i>Tasmāt</i>	so, therefore
<i>Tattva</i>	that-ness, existent
<i>Tīrthāṅkara</i>	ford-maker
<i>Trīṣṭubh</i>	a metre with four <i>pādas</i> of eleven syllables each
<i>Upādhi</i>	that which may be taken for or appears as another, disguise, qualification
<i>Upāya kauśalya</i>	strategic adroitness
<i>Uttama</i>	utmost
<i>Vaiśeṣika</i>	a natural-philosophical school of ancient and medieval India
<i>Vaiśya</i>	worker, commoner
<i>Vajra</i>	Indra's mythical weapon
<i>Varṇa</i>	appearance, colour, type, class
<i>Varṇadharmā</i>	(see <i>varṇa</i> and <i>dharma</i> )
<i>Varṇasaṃkara</i>	mixture of types leading to non-differentiability

<i>Vaśa</i>	wish, will, control
<i>Vedānta</i>	a school of Vedic exegesis and interpretation
<i>Vibhūti</i>	manifestation, development
<i>Vidhāna</i>	injunction, regulation
<i>Vidhi</i>	(see previous item)
<i>Vimūdhātmā</i>	confused in spirit / self, composed of confusion
<i>Viś</i>	the workers, community, inhabitants
<i>Viśaya</i>	sphere, range, sense-objects, range of the senses
<i>Viśiṣṭādvaita</i>	peculiarly / qualifiedly non-dual
<i>Vṛt</i>	(verbal root) turn, move, act
<i>Vyavasāyātmika</i>	composed of resolve
<i>Yajamāna</i>	patron of a <i>yajña</i> ceremony
<i>Yajña</i>	particular institutional and constitutional ritual
<i>Yajñārtha</i>	for the sake of / purpose of <i>yajña</i>
<i>Yajñārthāt</i>	(ablative case of previous item)
<i>Yama</i>	that which curbs, restraint, death
<i>Yena sarvam idaṃ tatam</i>	by whom all this is spread / extended
<i>Yoga</i>	yoking, attitudinal application
<i>Yogamāyā</i>	applied magical power
<i>Yogin</i>	one characterised by <i>yoga</i>
<i>Yuga</i>	era, world-period (there are four, which repeat in order)